QUEER MEANING AND CODED INTIMACY: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF INTERPERSONAL LANGUAGE IN ELTON JOHN'S SONGS

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Elton John is an especially productive case for investigating how popular lyrics encode identity, intimacy and cultural constraint. Few artists combine comparable commercial reach, cross-generational visibility and stylistic durability with a public life that intersects so directly with changing norms around sexuality. From his emergence at the turn of the 1970s to his sustained global prominence in the twenty-first century, Elton John has addressed mass audiences in multiple media (studio recordings, stadium tours, film and musical theatre), while cultivating a star persona that is at the same time exuberant, virtuosic and carefully managed (Eltonjohn.com, 2025). This combination of mainstream centrality and long historical span makes his repertoire an ideal site for asking how language in popular songs can both circulate widely and carry layered (at times veiled) meanings about desire, relationships and self-presentation. In short, he is not simply one successful figure among many; he is a reference point in Anglophone popular culture whose songs saturate radio playlists, public events and domestic listening, giving their linguistic textures unusual social reach and interpretability.

Elton John's lyrics (most often authored in collaboration with Bernie Taupin) are also a particularly rich object for analysis because they reconcile two pressures that define mainstream pop: the need for broad legibility and the need for expressive nuance. On the one hand, the songs must be instantly graspable: memorable hooks, quotable lines and accessible narratives that support chart success and live

performance. On the other, they frequently mobilise subtle interpersonal resources (choices of person reference, terms of address, tonal stance and affective lexis) that invite multiple readings (Rojek, C., 2011). This duality is not incidental. For artists who came to prominence when homosexuality was widely stigmatised and queer lives were rarely named in the mainstream, indirection was often the condition of possibility for reaching large audiences. In that cultural context, "you" can do significant work: it sustains a universal address while keeping partner gender unspecified; it enables intimate address without explicit disclosure; it preserves a public-facing neutrality compatible with radio formats, label expectations and market norms. Such linguistic strategies do not function as a secret code; rather, they are ordinary resources of English (pronouns, modality, appraisal, metaphor) deployed in patterned ways that balance self-expression with cultural constraint (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & White, 2005).

The present article approaches these issues with a linguistically grounded, empirically cautious programme based on the notion of context as defined by M.A.K. Halliday (1985). It treats "queer meaning" not as a stable essence secreted in the text but as a set of interpretative affordances licensed by patterned linguistic choices under specific historical conditions. It attends to the ordinary mechanics by which lyrics open or narrow interpretative space: the distribution of deictic choices; the calibration of commitment through modality (hedging, softening, volition, obligation); the selection of affective vocabulary that tilts towards tenderness, vulnerability, longing or resilience; and the textual packaging that foregrounds or backgrounds participants and experiences. It also recognises the temporal dimension: what reads as broadly "universal" in one period may, in retrospect or under altered public norms, become legible as queer intimacy, especially when viewed across a body of work rather than a single track.

2. OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this paper is to examine how linguistic analysis and particularly the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics can serve

as a means of uncovering hidden or layered meanings in popular culture. Song lyrics provide a particularly rich site for this kind of study, as they not only convey personal experiences and emotions but also reflect the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced. By analysing the ways in which language encodes relationships, stance and affect, this research seeks to demonstrate how linguistics can shed light on aspects of identity that might remain unspoken or indirect.

Elton John's lyrics are taken here as a central case study because of his dual significance: as one of the UK's most popularly celebrated musicians and as a figure of great importance to the queer community. When he began his career in the late 1960s and 1970s, homosexuality was not widely accepted, and queer identities were rarely represented openly in mainstream music. Like other artists of his era, such as Freddie Mercury and Prince, Elton John negotiated these constraints through creative strategies in his art. The study hence aims to explore how his language choices: pronouns, terms of address, tone and affective expressions, might suggest relational meanings that were less visible at the time but have become more significant in retrospect.

More broadly, the objective is to show that linguistic approaches like SFL are not confined to abstract or purely structural studies of language, but are powerful tools for cultural analysis. By paying attention to the interpersonal and contextual dimensions of language, it becomes possible to uncover how identity, desire and social roles are encoded in texts, including those of popular culture. In this way, the paper seeks to bridge linguistic and cultural studies, demonstrating how language functions both as a personal resource for self-expression and as a social practice shaped by historical conditions.

3.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As it has been mentioned before, this study aims to analyse how Elton John may have indirectly referred to men in his lyrics before publicly coming out, and in this line, the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework has been chosen to serve as a guide. This is because SFL views language as a resource for meaning-making rather than merely a

set of syntactic rules, emphasizing how linguistic choices are shaped by social and communicative contexts (Banks, 2019; Halliday, 1961). This makes it particularly suitable for analysing subtle, context-dependent meaning in song lyrics.

SFL conceptualises language as a network of choices, where speakers navigate interconnected grammatical and lexical options to construct meaning. As Banks explains:

> At each point in the system the steps which follow are obligatory. You cannot choose indicative without choosing between declarative and interrogative; it must be one or the other. So in creating language we move through the system […], and the final choice that is made […] is the choice of the individual words that make up our message (Banks, 2019, p. 2).

In the case of this paper, in Elthon John's songs, choices in the use of pronouns, terms of address and evaluative language can encode hidden or indirect references to male partners or desires.

In addition, Halliday's (1985) framework organizes meaning into three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual. For this study, the interpersonal metafunction is especially important, as it governs how speakers express stance, evaluation and relationships with others. In Elton John's lyrics, the interpersonal choices such as the way he refers to other people, the tone he uses and the affective language he employs could create subtle, layered meanings that hint at romantic or emotional attraction.

The ideational metafunction identifies participants and actions in the lyrics, showing who is involved and what experiences or relationships are being represented. The textual metafunction organizes information within and across clauses, guiding listener focus and shaping how the lyrics are interpreted (Banks, 2019). Altogether, the exploration of these metafunctions allow for a multi-layered analysis of meaning, revealing both explicit content and potential hidden subtext.

Another crucial aspect of analysis of SFL is context and register, as meaning in language is inseparable from context, and Banks divides into field, tenor and mode, which each correspond to the three metafunctions beforementioned:

> Field is the ongoing activity of which the language is a part. Tenor is the relationship between the person who is communicating and those he is communicating with. Mode is the form through which the message is communicated, that is, basically, spoken or written (Banks, 2019, p. 5)

By examining the three metafunctions, context and register, together with the greater framework, this study can systematically explore how Elton John's linguistic choices, and particularly his interpersonal strategies could encode subtle relational meanings. This approach helps uncover how lyrics may indirectly reference men, reflecting social and personal constraints of the time while conveying nuances emotional and relational experiences.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. CORPUS DESCRIPTION

The corpus consists of 25 songs by Elton John, sampled to cover three commercially and culturally distinct periods: the 1970s (16 texts), the 1980s (5 texts), and the 1990s–2020s (4 texts). Selection criteria considered (a) single and album sales, (b) online plays and (c), music poll rankings (Wade, 2025; Official Charts, 2025; Spotify, 2025). Lyrics were sourced from established catalogues and cross-checked against official releases. Spelling and punctuation were lightly normalised (e.g., standardising contractions) while preserving lexis and lineation.

For corpus analytics, texts were treated as plain-text files and aggregated both as a whole and by decade into three subcorpora. *Lancsbox* (Brezina & Platt, 2025) identified 7557 tokens in the whole corpus (5338 in the 70s subcorpus, 1218 in the 80s subcorpus and 1001 tokens in the subcorpus that represents John's lyrics since the 90s until today).

For qualitative reading, songs were also handled individually to retain song-level discourse dynamics. Following *IRaMuTeQ* (Ratinaud, 2025) conventions, the 25 texts were segmented into 195 textual segments (TS); 137 TS were successfully classified (utilisation 70.26%). The software identified 7189 occurrences, comprising 914 lemmas, 655 active forms and 259 supplementary forms.

4.2. Tools and materials

This study combined two complementary tools to capture both distributional patterns and local meanings in the lyrics. *IRaMuTeQ* (Ratinaud, 2025) was used for lexical-statistical exploration. It generated the descending hierarchical classification (CHD), χ^2-based keywords, and co-occurrence structures, and it produced factorial correspondence analyses (FCA) from which we derived class partitions, dendrograms and a word-cloud of high-frequency forms. To probe the interpersonal workings of the texts in context, we then turned to *LancsBox* (Brezina & Platt, 2025) and its sub tools KWIC, Collocations and GraphColl. This allowed us to compute keyword and keyness profiles for each subcorpus against the whole corpus, track pronoun distributions with normalised frequencies, read concordance lines for mood, modality and appraisal, and visualise collocational networks within a ±5-word span. Categories for close reading were taken from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), with particular attention to interpersonal systems (mood, modality and appraisal).

4.3. Procedure and data treatment

The analysis followed a staged workflow, moving from corpus construction to exploratory partitioning and, finally, interpretative synthesis. First, the corpus was compile, depurated and normalised. For corpus analytics, texts were saved as plain-text files and aggregated both as a whole and by decade into three subcorpora. *LancsBox* identified 7,557 tokens in total (1970s: 5,338; 1980s: 1,218; 1990s–present: 1,001). In parallel, to support qualitative reading, songs were also analysed individually to retain song-level discourse dynamics.

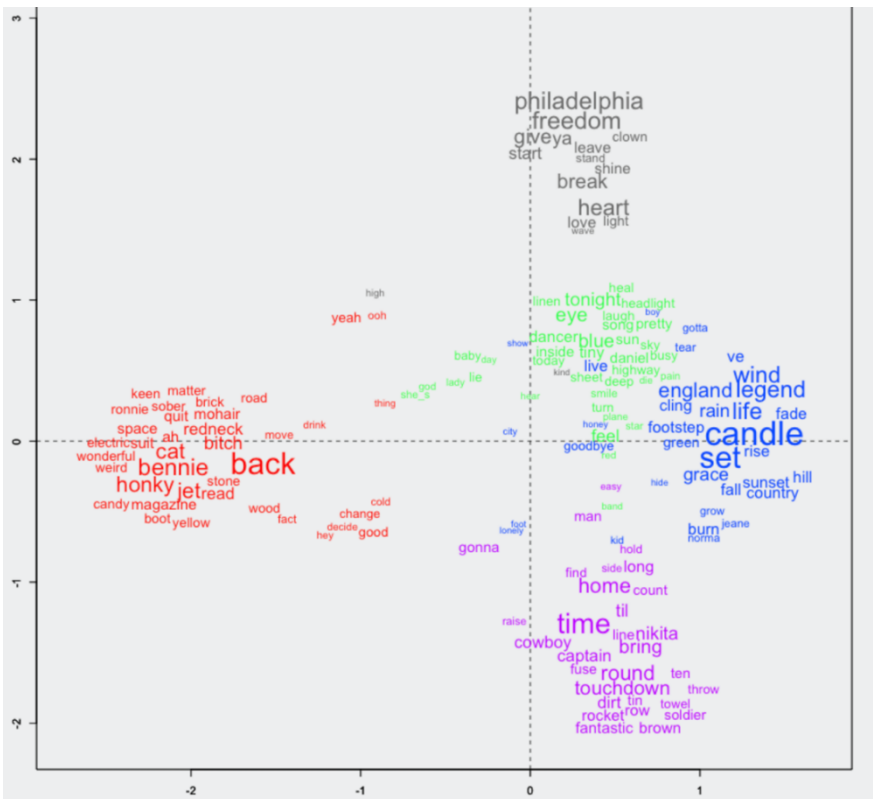
The texts were after being tokenised; for *IRaMuTeQ* they were segmented into 195 textual segments (TS), and for *LancsBox* they were lemmatised for concordance and collocation work. *IRaMuTeQ* then registered 7189 occurrences, comprising 914 lemmas, 655 active forms, and 259 supplementary forms. Guided by these partitions, targeted queries were issued in *LancsBox*. Finally, close readings were conducted, prompted by the concordances found in *Lancsbox*. For each song, interpersonal choices for intimacy and ambiguity were explored and observations were noted diachronically to identify continuities and shifts across periods.

5. RESULTS

5.1. IRAMUTEQ

The final corpus comprises 25 texts that were segmented into 195 textual segments (TS); out of which 137 were successfully classified (utilisation 70.26%). The software identified 7,189 occurrences, comprising 914 lemmas, 655 active forms and 259 supplementary forms. After corpus compilation and cleaning, Factorial Correspondence Analysis (FCA) in IRaMuTeQ projected the words-by-classes table onto a Cartesian plane where proximity indicates above-chance co-occurrence and distance signals lexical contrast.

FIGURE 1. *Factorial Correspondence Analysis (FCA).*



Source: *IRaMuTeQ*

The resulting map, as shown in Figure 1, organises the lexicon into five colour-coded semantic fields whose positions reveal how they relate to one another in the corpus. The Green class sits at the interpersonal core, gathering terms of address and feeling such as “baby,” “lady,” “feel,” “smile” and “heal”; this cluster provides the relational frame through which most lyrics speak to an implied addressee. Closest to this hub lies the Grey class, which carries a discourse of freedom and movement (“freedom,” “start,” “leave,” “stand,” “break,” “light,” “wave,” “Philadelphia”). Its adjacency to Green indicates that expressions of affect are frequently coupled with narratives of departure, renewal or release, so that feeling and motion form a mutually reinforcing pair. The Blue class supplies the scenic setting (“rain,” “sunset,” “wind,” “England,” “hill,” “country,” “city,” “rise,” “fall,” “fade,” “life”) against which that interpersonal exchange unfolds. Its broad spread across the plane suggests that landscape and temporality are drawn on flexibly to situate intimacy in recognisable places, weather and times, while keeping partner gender unmarked.

Below these clusters, the Purple class contributes a vocabulary of pace and propulsion (“hold,” “count,” “long,” “gonna,” “’til,” “raise,” “time,” “bring,” “fuse,” “touchdown,” “round,” “throw,” “rocket”). This set interacts with Blue by converting static scenes into kinetic ones, intensifying or accelerating the interpersonal script without altering its openness. By contrast, the Red class forms a more colloquial and concrete pole, mixing proper names, materials, slang, clothing and everyday motion (“Ronnie,” “Bennie,” “wood,” “brick,” “mohair,” “bitch,” “honky,” “suit,” “boot”), along with interjections such as “hey,” “yeah” and “ooh.” Its relative separation from the Green–Grey–Blue–Purple nexus marks a stylistic layer of character detail and register play that colours scenes and voices but does not anchor the central address–feeling dynamic. Read together, the classes depict a system in which interpersonal address (Green) is animated by freedom and movement (Grey), staged through landscape and time (Blue), energised by tempo (Purple), and textured by colloquial naming and material detail (Red).

5.2. LANCSBOX

To begin the second part of the corpus analysis, the *LancsBox* KWIC tool is employed in order to discover the specific data that is unidentifiable in *IRaMuTeQ*. Before continuing with specific collocation searches, it is relevant to note that when searching for the total term list for the whole corpus ordered by frequency, the first most used word is "the" with 348 occurrences, which is to be expected, being this the most important function word; but the second and third are "I" and "you" with 320 and 230 instances respectively. Especially with the case of "you," this could be a very clear indicator of Elton John using this genderless pronoun to refer to his lovers in the different songs without ever letting know their gender. This idea is reinforced further by the fact that the first gendered pronoun does not appear until the 59th position ("she"), followed by "her" in the 132nd, "his" in the 22nd, "he" in the 269th and "him" in the 640th.

Firstly, the pronouns present in the corpus have been divided in the following table per subcorpus as well as to properly identify the differences between the decades.

Pronouns are present in 22 out of the 25 texts: 16 from the 1970s, 4 from the 1980s and 4 from the 1990s onwards. Table 1 presents the frequencies and normalised values of pronouns across these periods. Across the whole corpus, the most frequent pronouns are "I" (normalised 42.34) and "you" (30.44), showing a strong first-second person orientation. Neutral pronouns such as "it" (18.79), "me" (11.38) and "your" (11.12) are also relatively common. By contrast, gendered pronouns appear at much lower frequencies, as the feminine forms "she" (3.18) and "her" (1.46) are somewhat more common than the masculine forms "he" (0.53), "his" (0.79) and "him" (0.13).

In the 1970s subcorpus of 16 texts, the dominant pronouns are "I" (44.40) and "you" (26.41), followed by "it" (15.92), "me" (12.74), and "your" (11.81). Both feminine and masculine pronouns occur, though sparingly. Feminine pronouns are more frequent overall with "she" (4.31) and "her" (1.50) compared to the masculine forms "he" (0.75), "his" (1.12) and "him" (0.19). In the 1980s subcorpus, pronouns appear

in four of the texts where "you" (40.96) becomes slightly more frequent than "I" (31.97), with "it" (26.97) also appearing at a relatively high rate. Masculine pronouns are quite more visible here ("he," 10.68) than feminine ones, which remain limited ("she," 0.82; "her," 1.64).

TABLE 1. *Pronoun frequencies per subcorpus*

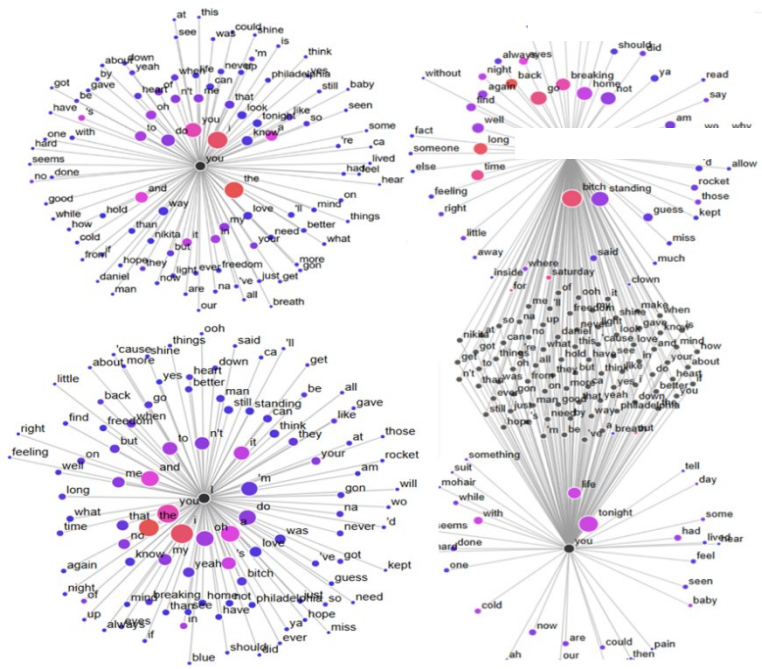
Whole Corpus				70s				80s				90s and onwards			
Value	Frequency	Normalised	Texts	Value	Frequency	Normalised	Texts	Value	Frequency	Normalised	Texts	Value	Frequency	Normalised	Texts
i	320	42.34	22	i	237	44.40	16	i	51	41.87	4	you	41	40.96	4
you	230	30.44	22	you	141	26.41	14	you	48	39.40	4	i	32	31.97	2
it	142	18.79	23	it	85	15.92	15	it	30	24.65	4	it	27	26.97	4
my	93	12.31	18	my	75	14.05	14	my	13	10.68	3	your	16	15.98	1
me	86	11.38	21	me	68	12.74	13	me	9	7.39	4	me	9	8.99	4
your	84	11.12	18	your	63	11.81	14	's	7	5.75	2	's	8	7.99	2
they	50	6.62	13	they	39	7.31	10	they	6	4.93	1	we	7	6.99	2
's	35	4.62	9	we	25	4.68	7	your	5	4.10	3	our	5	4.99	1
we	34	4.50	11	she	23	4.31	4	all	3	2.46	1	my	5	4.99	1
she	24	3.18	5	's	20	3.75	5	our	2	1.64	2	they	5	4.99	2
us	14	1.85	7	us	11	2.06	5	we	2	1.64	2	us	3	2.99	2
her	11	1.46	7	her	8	1.50	4	itself	2	1.64	1	itself	2	2.00	1
our	10	1.32	6	them	7	1.31	3	her	2	1.64	2	all	1	1.00	1
all	9	1.19	7	ya	6	1.12	1	she	1	0.82	1	yours	1	1.00	1
them	7	0.93	3	his	6	1.12	3					ya	1	1.00	1
ya	7	0.93	2	all	5	0.94	5					her	1	1.00	1
his	6	0.79	3	myself	4	0.75	1								
myself	4	0.53	1	he	4	0.75	2								
itself	4	0.53	2	our	3	0.56	3								
he	4	0.53	2	'em	2	0.37	1								
'em	2	0.26	1	urselve	2	0.37	1								
ourselves	2	0.26	1	yoursel	2	0.37	1								
yourself	2	0.26	1	its	1	0.19	1								
its	1	0.13	1	such	1	0.19	1								
such	1	0.13	1	their	1	0.19	1								
yours	1	0.13	1	him	1	0.19	1								
their	1	0.13	1												
him	1	0.13	1												

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data provided by *Lancsbox X*

In the 1990s and onwards subcorpus, with apparition of pronouns in 4 texts too, "you" (40.96) becomes slightly more frequent than "I" (31.97), with "it" (26.97) also remaining prominent. Gendered pronouns are rare in this period: there is a single instance of "her," while masculine pronouns are absent. Taken together, the results show that while first and second person pronouns dominate across all decades, the balance of gendered third person pronouns varies. Feminine forms are somewhat more common in the 1970s, masculine forms peak in 1980s and both categories are minimal in the 1990s onwards. Neutral pronouns such as "I," "you" and "it" remain consistently central to Elton John's lyrics across all three decades.

The next step in this corpus analysis was to see whether, when using the GraphColl tool and entering a pronoun such as "she," the words and particles utilized together with it in highest frequency could reveal something about John's subtle or not use of gendered and ungendered pronouns. These results are shown in the graphs below.

GRAPH 1. *GraphColl collocations for "you" and "I".*

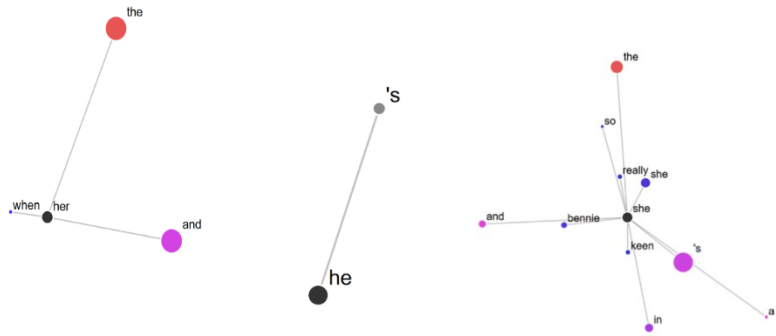


Source: *Lancsbox* X.

In Graph 1 it can be seen that the most relevant collocations for the present study are "I," and "you," with 27 instances of "love" as well. The most common collocation with "I," is its counter-partner "you." The second most important collocation for this research is "love" again, with 39 occurrences, which matches the data from graph I when searching for the collocation of "you" and "I" together. Here it is visible that "you" and "I" share crucial collocates which are commonly related to love, such as "look," "freedom," "breath," "need," "man," "good," "hope," "hold," "light" or "shine," among others.

No further information is provided when searching for collocates of gendered pronouns. Graph 2 is only displayed below as a proof of their scarcity.

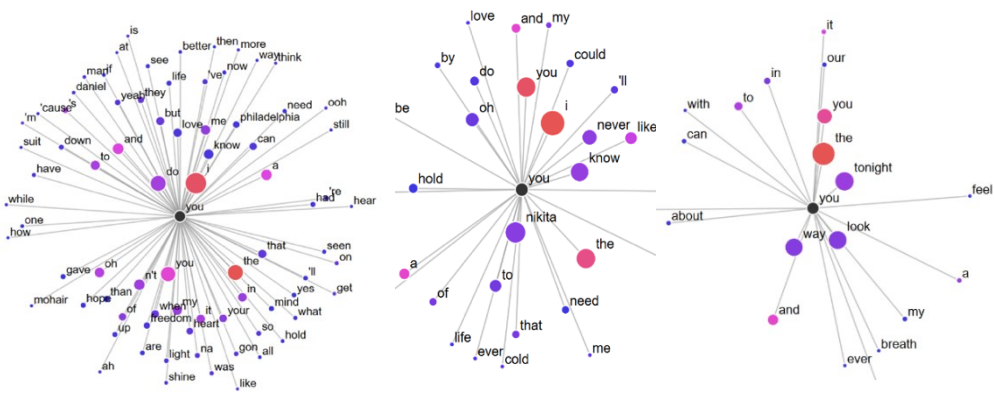
GRAPH 2. *Collocates of gendered pronouns.*



Source: *Lancsbox* X.

A few collocates appear with female-gendered pronouns, but prove to be content-irrelevant, as they are only function words in a narrative context, like in the case of "her" and "I," and "I" and "she." Finally, to complete the corpus analysis on LancsBox, the collocations of what has been proven to be the most important word in this research project: "you," are inspected by subcorpus in order to identify whether its collocations differ.

GRAPH 3. *I-You collocates by decade.*



Source: *Lancsbox* X.

First of all, it must be noted that the number of collocates and their variation between subcorpora is not relevant for the present study, as their size differs, and hence the importance lies in whether the main collocations vary or not. That said, in graph 3, from the 70s, "you" most frequently collocates with items such as "do," "know," "what," "your," "me," "love" and "how," showing a wide variety of contexts of use. In the 80s, the main collocations include "Nikita," "never," "know," "could," "need," "hold" and "love," indicating that "you" often appears in connection with emotional vocabulary and with specific proper nouns in the 80s subcorpus as it was mentioned earlier. Finally, in the 90s and onwards subcorpus shown in graph 3, "you" is closely associated with items such as "tonight," "way," "look," "feel," "my" and "breath," placing it in contexts related to intimacy, affect and personal experience. All in all, these results highlight that while "you" remains a central pronoun across all three periods, the words that associate with it could, as it was expected, reveal hidden information in its metadiscourse, which must be solved through context, for which close reading is necessary, and is shown in the next section.

5.3. Close reading

SFL-guided readings across representative tracks indicate a stable stylistic economy of coded intimacy in which interpersonal choices do most of the meaning work while ideational and textual resources organise that intimacy and control its visibility.

(1) Hold me closer, tiny dancer.
(2) Rocket man, burning out his fuse up here alone.
(3) Do you still feel the pain?

In early-1970s ballads, the mood system is overwhelmingly declarative such as in examples (1) and (2), with interrogatives used sparingly as alignment moves (3). Modality regularly attenuates commitment so that desire can be voiced without categorical disclosure.

(4) I think it's gonna be a long, long time.
(5) If I was a sculptor, but then again, no.
(6) I don't have much money, but if I did…

In *Rocket Man* (1972), (4) signals belief rather than certainty. In *Your Song* (1970), hedging appears as self-repair and conditionality, as examples (5) and (6) both voice desire while avoiding categorical assertions. Once again, *Your Song* (1970) centres a direct I↔you pair and repeatedly softens assertions through conditional, hedged formulations and first-person epistemic stance, keeping the addressee intimate but ungendered.

(7) I hope you don't mind.
(8) How wonderful life is while you're in the world.
(9) I know it's not much.

In addition, phrases such as (7) and (8) maintain intimacy through an unmarked "you", letting the song feel personal yet universally addressable. The epistemic stance is consistently first-person and modest (9) which further softens claims and keeps the focus on feeling rather than identification.

Third-person gendering in Elton John's early work appears mainly in narration, not in direct love address. *Daniel* (1972) follows a male character from a storyteller's distance:

(10) Daniel is travelling tonight on a plane.
(11) I can see Daniel waving goodbye.

Examples (10) and (11) are third-person lines that report what he does and how he appears, rather than constructing an I↔you romance script. This distribution (second person for intimacy and third person for story) supports the claim that early success rested on keeping the addressee unspecified, reserving gendered reference for narrative frames. Appraisal choices reinforce this pattern. Affect is foregrounded while Judgement of behaviour is kept in the background.

(12) I hope you don't mind.
(13) It's sad, so sad.

In *Your Song* (1970), modest first-person stance and phrases like (12) present vulnerability and tenderness without moralising. *Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word* (1976) centres sadness and helplessness (12; 13) again privileging emotional states over blame or praise. Across these songs, the lyrics keep intimacy in the I/you channel and shift

gendered references to third-person narration, while the evaluative load falls on longing, vulnerability and tenderness, not on labelling conduct.

The textual and ideational planes organise intimacy so that it remains broadly legible, chiefly by placing feelings in landscape and journey frames and by converting description into motion. In *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (1973), the stance toward the relationship is built against an itinerary of leaving and returning: the singer wants to go "back to the" countryside and away from the "Yellow Brick Road," a to-and-from logic that situates emotion in place and travel. *Philadelphia Freedom* (1975) tightens the link between feeling and movement by pairing a location with a vocabulary of release (words such as "freedom," "stand," and "shine") which map an empowerment arc onto a city that is historically emblematic in U.S. queer history. *Candle in the Wind* (1973/1997) frames tenderness in public time and weather, linking grief to images of a "candle" whose flame is shaken by the "wind" and to the temporal markers of remembrance:

(14) Goodbye, Norma Jean.

Such as example (14), so that private affect is voiced in a shared commemorative register. The tempo/propulsion field performs a complementary role.

(15) I think it's gonna be a long, long time.
(16) I'm gonna be

In *Rocket Man* (1972), space-travel lexis and future-oriented verbs (15;16) create distance and drift around the I↔you axis. Because of that distance, the song suggests intimacy without stating it plainly or naming the relationship directly.

(17) Get about as oiled as a diesel train.
(18) Get a little action in.

Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting (1973) intensifies stance through kinetic imperatives and action verbs (17;18) energising the voice without introducing gendered reference. Across these songs, theme–rheme choices repeatedly place "I" or "you" at the start of clauses:

(19) I think it's gonna…

(20) You can tell everybody…

(19;20) so that the interpersonal relation stays textually prominent while scenic and kinetic elements circulate as supporting frames. The result is a discourse that feels intimate and immediate, yet travels easily across audiences because the staging is universal: weather, roads, cities, night-time, speed, and time itself.

From the mid-1980s onward, the lyrics adapt, rather than abandon, the earlier interpersonal pattern. The songs still centre a tight I↔you exchange, but the tone shifts between resilience and open self-assertion.

(21) I'm still standing […]better than I ever did.
(22) Maybe that's why…
(23) Should have known.
(24) Nikita, you'll never know.

In *I'm Still Standing* (1983) the voice is declarative and intensified, repeatedly asserting recovery and agency (21), a classic case of graduation (greater force/focus) in SFL terms. *I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues* (1983) keeps the interpersonal address yet hedges commitment through epistemic and deontic modality: lines such as (22) and (23) register uncertainty and obligation rather than blunt claims, so intimacy is voiced without closing interpretive options. "Nikita" (1985) exemplifies addressee indeterminacy. The lyric addresses Nikita directly (24) but never marks grammatical gender in English; the name alone carries cultural gender cues while the text itself remains neutral. This choice preserved the broad radio-friendly legibility that rewarded unmarked second-person address, even as the video offered a specific storyline. Even when the topic is public image or personal repair, the songs keep the address tightly dyadic (spoken from an "I" to a "you"). In *I'm Still Standing* (1983) the refrain "I'm still standing" asserts resilience, but the surrounding lines speak to a specific addressee, casting recovery as something declared in someone's hearing rather than to a faceless crowd.

(25) It's no sacrifice.
(26) It's a human sign.
(27) Can you feel… tonight?
(28) Something about the way…

Sacrifice (1989/1990) lowers force through softened epistemics (25;26), letting duty and desire be weighed without moral blame. *Can You Feel the Love Tonight* (1994) uses interrogatives as alignment moves that invite the addressee into shared affect instead of naming a partner. *Something About the Way You Look Tonight* (1997) intensifies Appreciation (28) to warm the interpersonal stance while still avoiding gender-specific wording. Across these later periods, then, the hallmark remains a close I/you channel, supported by modal calibration (degrees of certainty, volition, and obligation) and a rich affect vocabulary. The effect is consistent with the earlier style: intimacy that feels immediate and radio-legible, yet ungendered in the text, adapted to new musical settings and cultural climates.

The FCA classes help explain how this works systemically. The Green hub (address + feelings) is the gravitational centre of the repertoire and is the foundation for the close readings above *(Your Song, The One, I Guess That's Why…*). The Grey field (freedom/movement) links that foundation to ideas of departure and renewal *(Philadelphia Freedom, I'm Still Standing*). The Blue field (landscape) supplies neutral, highly portable layout (*Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Candle in the Wind, Rocket Man*), enabling intimacy to be rendered publicly acceptable in a specific scenario. The Purple field (speed/tempo) energises this layout and often carries the intensification load *(Rocket Man, Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting*). The Red field (proper names, materials, slang, clothing) adds character texture *(Bennie and the Jets, Honky Cat*) relatable to John's star persona, but typically sits off-centre relative to the I/you frame, underscoring that colloquial colouring supports rather than determines the interpersonal script.

6. DISCUSSIONS

The evidence from all methods and periods points to a single mechanism. Elton John's songs keep intimacy publicly legible by maintaining a stable I–you address and by surrounding it with linguistic choices that preserve indeterminacy. *LancsBox* counts show that first and second person forms dominate, while gendered third person pronouns are comparatively rare. After function words, the most frequent content words are I and you, whereas she and he appear much lower in the frequency

list. Close readings clarify the effect of this distribution. Early ballads such as *Your Song* rely on conditional phrasing and first-person epistemic markers, for example "If I was a sculptor, but then again, no […]" and "I think" which soften commitment and keep intimacy in an ungendered channel. When gender appears, it is typically narratorial rather than romantic, as in "Daniel." In later decades the template is adapted rather than replaced. *I'm Still Standing* intensifies expression to voice resilience. *I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues* calibrates stance with epistemic and deontic modality. *Nikita* addresses a named figure without marking grammatical gender in the lyrics. *Sacrifice*, *Can You Feel the Love Tonight*, and *Something About the Way You Look Tonight* reinforce affect while avoiding gender specification.

IRaMuTeQ's FCA explains how these effects are organised. The Green class, which combines address and feelings, serves as a foundation for the repertoire. The Grey class links that centre to narratives of departure and renewal. The Blue class supplies landscape and time as portable staging. The Purple class adds propulsion and pace. The Red class provides character texture through names, materials and colloquial items. These classes align with the song analyses. Address drives meaning, scenery and movement organise it, tempo energises it, and colloquial detail enriches it without displacing the interpersonal core.

These patterns should not be read as biographical confessions. The "Elton John" voice is a performed brand voice that is co-written, arranged and staged across media. In this setting, queer meaning is best treated as an interpretative possibility created by textual patterning within particular historical conditions. The pattern persists as the industry shifts from radio and albums to video, soundtracks and streaming. The pronoun economy remains stable, modality continues to hedge or amplify commitment, and appraisal remains weighted toward affect with little judgement. The reduction of gendered third person forms coincides with greater public acceptance. Even so, the lyrics continue to avoid specification in the 90s and later periods, which suggests that ambiguity functions as a durable stylistic resource rather than a temporary defensive tactic. The study is limited by the modest corpus size, the use of circulating lyric versions, and the inevitable gap that always separates textual cues from audience interpretation. Despite these limits, the agreement

between statistical patterns, concordance evidence and close readings supports the conclusion that Elton John's catalogue is a clear example of how mainstream lyrics manage identity work under constraint.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The study set three aims. The first was to show that an SFL based approach can reveal layered meanings in popular lyrics. The second was to test, through Elton John's repertoire, how indirect strategies signal relational meanings when stigma is present and how those strategies shift over time. The third was to demonstrate that SFL can connect linguistic analysis to cultural interpretation. The findings meet these aims. Combining *IRaMuTeQ* and *LancsBox* with SFL categories uncovered a consistent toolkit. The I–you dyad, modal hedging and calibration, and an appraisal lexicon rich in affect produce interpretative openness beyond literal denotation. Song analyses showed how unmarked second person address, selective third person narration and tonal mitigation enable intimacy without explicit disclosure in early work and continue to function in later decades. The FCA classes clarified how freedom and movement, landscape and time, and tempo provide the scaffolding that supports the interpersonal centre.

Together, the corpus patterns and close readings show that Elton John's lyrics keep the addressee ungendered in the text while remaining easy to recognise and to circulate in mainstream settings. This balance makes queer legible interpretations available without insisting on a single reading. The configuration that emerges is consistent across periods. Address holds the centre, scenery and movement supply the frame, tempo provides energy, and colloquial detail adds colour. This framework offers a portable model for analysing other long running popular repertoires.

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