



## Getting Better: A Systematic Functional Interpretation of Grief Through a Song

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### *Abstract*

This article presents an analysis of the song *Get Better* by British band Alt-J. The song was written amid the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus. It mainly represents grief after the loss of a beloved person from the perspective of the bereaved. The analysis was conducted using the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework by Halliday with an emphasis on the three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual. The findings of the analysis determined that the song depicted a few of the occurrences that some people unfortunately had to experience after unforeseeable death of a loved one and how they managed to overcome grief.

*Keywords:* bereavement, grief, systemic functional linguistics.

### 1. Introduction

After two years of pandemic, it was hard to hear that so many people had died from the COVID-19. Globally, the death toll amounts to 6,296,771 passings (World Health Organization, n.d.). During this time of isolation and lockdowns, millions of people around the world were suddenly connected through the experience of bereavement. The band Alt-J used their art form to create a song based on this occurrence. Thus, this article has the purpose to understand how an omnipresent and eminent occurrence is reflected through art. The motivation of this analysis stems from my own curiosity to learn more about the topics of grief or loss and they ways in which they are depicted through art. The objective of the study is guided by the following research question:

RQ: How does the song *Get Better* portraits the reality of loss and bereavement during pandemic times?

The article offers information about the band Alt-J and the inspiration for writing the song. The literature review provides an overview of the concepts of grief and how it is linked with art. The methodology section includes the definition for the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

framework by Halliday as well as the metafunctions commonly related with the same framework of analysis. Finally, the analysis of the song is presented.

- The song uses mainly existential references throughout the song to represent (1) the connection between the bereaved and the deceased, (2) to allude to the presence of the beloved departed in the present, past, and future time.
- Although the song was said to be fictional, it illustrates ways in which people coped with the quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Song writing was an outlet of inspiration to depict a very sensitive yet omnipresent topic, grief.

## 2. Context

### 2.1 *The Band*

Alt-J (also stylized as  $\Delta$ ) is a British band from Leeds formed in 2008. It was in 2012 that they became a global sensation with their award-winning Mercury Prize album *An Awesome Wave* (Monger, n.d.). Currently, the band is comprised by singer, guitarist, and lyricist Joe Newman; keyboardist and vocalist Gus Unger-Hamilton; and drummer Thom Green. After their acclaimed first album, on 2014, Alt-J launched their sophomore album, *This is All Yours*, which was critically well-received and earned them their first Grammy nomination (*Ibid.*).

In addition, in 2017, the trio released their third album, *Relaxer*. Although it was not as successful as their previous works, the album received a Mercury Prize nomination (Monger, n.d.). Lastly, the band issued their latest album, *The Dream*, in February 2022. Something that distinguishes this album from the others is its “unexplored emotional space, showcasing warmth and humanity” (Morgan, n.d., para. 5) on their songs’ lyrics. This means that the band had not written such personal of feelings-drenched songs on their previous albums. These special characteristics are particularly shown on the track *Get Better*, which has been chosen for analysis in this paper.

### 2.2 *The song*

*Get better* is probably one of the most personal songs ever produced by the band. The song is loosely based on true events that happened during the pandemic caused by COVID-19 where a significant number of people died while others were left to mourn. It also depicts some of the coping mechanisms some people lived while quarantining. These ideas can be supported by what Joe Newman, lyricist of the band, had to say about it:

“[Get better] is the union of two songs. The first an improvised song from 2018 I sang to my partner who was suffering from period pain. The second was a chord structure I worked on in lockdown that focused on someone living through a bereavement. The context of the pandemic lent my words a chilling weight and gave me a new sense of responsibility as a lyricist. Whilst the direct events described are fictional, I believe – or I hope – that it’s emotionally the most honest song I’ve written”. – Joe ( $\Delta$ (alt-J), 2021).

The merge of both songs described by the lyricist may have turned it into one of their most memorable songs. This might be due to how close to reality the song is. However, this is not the first time Alt-J has written songs based on true events. For example, *Taro* is one of the best examples of this. This song talks about the reimagined lives and true experiences of photographers Gerard Taro and Robert Capa (The Sherp, 2016). Nonetheless, there is still something remarkable about the song *Get Better* which makes it special.

Such distinction could be stated by mentioning that there is something primal about it which makes it resonate with their audience. Although the song depicts certain reality to what the world lived through in the times of pandemic, Joe Newman, on an interview for KVNA FM (2022) states that the song depicts coping with bereavement and going through the loss of the closest person in someone's life. In that same interview, Newman mentions that going through those feelings is something we all experience (KVNA FM, 2022). This last reflection about the creation of the song may be what makes it the most relatable and personable to the listener.

Although the lyricist mentioned that the events represented in the song are fictional, there is still some reality in them. He stated that the song talks about coping mechanisms and was roughly inspired in the pandemic. Raj and Bajaj (2021) reveal that young working adults adopted coping mechanisms to fight mental health through lockdown. Some of those methods included engaging in a pleasurable activity, for example: doing yoga, reading, self-care, among others. This may be another aspect about the song which makes it relatable.

### 3. Literature review

According to Fuchs (2021), grief is defined as the loss of a person and to how to cope it with. Grief and its relation with language has been studied before (Brubker et al., 2012; Corless et al., 2014; Hedtke, 2002; Rosenblatt, 2016; Strange, 2002). This suggests that there is in fact a connection amongst the two. The studies cited above agree on how language is modified by the bereaved when they express their feelings or emotions about grief. The studies also mention how language presents certain expressions to talk about positively or negatively about one's grief. The cases presented in the aforementioned studies are about real situations where people lost a loved one and were experiencing the loss. However, none of those same studies depicted grief fictionally or through forms of art.

#### 3.1 *Grief and art*

According to Ritchie (2003: 1) displacement caused by grief or loss has been seen as a "source of creative vision". This means that, through time, humankind has relied on emotions as venues to create all sorts of art. Special attention is awarded to the mood of melancholy, "a general affective state that is sensitive to the ontological situation of transience" (Fuchs, 2021: 9), as a means of creative output. Ritchie (2003) mentions that although concepts of tragedy, alienation, and death do not represent means of expression to ordinary people, they are representative of the mad artist. In this case, the mad artist is represented by the lyricist and singer of the *Get better* song. Although the events are not related to true feelings, the events are representative of them.

Ritchie (2003) comments on the modern distance that exists between life and death and how it is necessary to abridge the two concepts. He states that this distance is caused by ontological security, meaning that humankind tries to shield away from a disorder which may alter the sense of life. Death is considered to be the ultimate form of disorder (Giddens, 1991). Ritchie (2003) also mentions how media has both alienated and abridge the concepts of life and death. Television shows such as horror films, exhibitions of mortal remains, writing poetry or prose as well as other means of art are examples of this.

#### 3.2 *Views on grief*

Howarth (2000) states that grief is not only the feeling of losing a loved one, but also the feeling of the loss of self. He mentions that within grief, if the deceased is let go, then that part of self is also detached. This view of grief is similar to the popular belief of *if you die, a part of me*

*will die with you*. On the basis of the previously mentioned view on grief, Køster (2021) mentions that, within grief, there is an emotion of longing, longing for the dead, longing for the other.

Kellehear (2002) claims that grief if not shared is a denial of experiencing and acknowledging the state of bereavement, loss, pain, and mourning. This view is representative of the popular belief of saying *if I don't talk about, it didn't happen*. Didion (2015) reflects on grief by saying how it affects both body and mind. She continues and states that “[g]rief is different. Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life” (p. 27). This quote of Didion exemplifies how grief is a process which should not be underpinned as once-occurring, but, on the contrary, as ever present as long as the person is mourning a death.

#### 4. Methodology

This section defines the systemic functional linguistics framework (SFL) which informs the analysis of the song. The three metafunctions related with SFL, ideational, interpersonal, and textual are also described here.

##### 4.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics

SFL is a descriptive and interpretative framework which considers language as a meaning-making resource (Eggins, 2004). Additionally, in order to say and do meaningful things, we make use of the resources available in a language. These resources are the lexicogrammar components of language which enable us to make meanings possible (Fatima et al., 2018). SFL is then an approach to analyze meaning from which language is the subject of study.

Language is a social semiotic source for making and exchanging meaning from which we also construct our reality and endorse social relationships (Eggins, 2004; Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Webster, 2009). Through language we are able to produce what Halliday and Webster (2009: 5) call *acts of meaning*. They described acts of meaning as “linguistic instances of the linguistic system of meaning potential” (*Ibid.*) and it is through these acts of meaning that we build communication and extract meaning. Furthering on their definition, Halliday and Webster (2009) state that acts of meaning correspond to a subclass of semiotic acts called semantics.

On one hand, a semiotic system is an arbitrary social convention by which it is traditionally agreed that a particular meaning will be realized by a particular representation (Eggins, 2004). In this semiotic system we refer to the representations as signs. Each sign has a particular meaning ascribed by a group of people. It is the oppositions, not the substances, in the semiotic system that are important (Eggins, 2004). This means, for example, that the representation of a bird, the sign, the mental representation, the signified, and the physical representation, the signifier are all equal disregarding the species of the bird.

On the other hand, according to Halliday and Webster (2009) a semantic system is grounded on grammar. It is composed of three strata which combined add up to a whole linguistic system. The first level is semantics followed by the lexicogrammar level and, below, on the third level, is the phonological and morphological level. Additionally, a semantic system is organized by three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual (Halliday & Webster, 2009). These metafunctions may be the base of how to conduct an analysis of language.

## 4.2 Metafunctions

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) there are three metafunction from the SFL framework. The first one, ideational, refers to how language construe human experience. It names things meaning it construe them into categories. These categories differ from one language to another. “Language provides a theory of human experience, and certain of the resources of the lexicogrammar of every language are dedicated to that function” (p. 30). The second metafunction is interpersonal. While we use language to enact meaning, we also use it to perform personal and social relationships. The clause is not only a grammatical representation, but also a process that informs doing or happening, saying or sensing, being or having. “It is also a proposal, by which we inform or question, give an order or make an offer, and express our appraisal of and attitude towards whoever we are addressing and what we are talking about” (p. 30). Lastly, the textual metafunction indicates sequencing grammatical patterns which enact meaning and are address to someone. It also adds another mode of meaning that relates to the construction of text. “In a sense this can be regarded as an enabling or facilitating function, since both the others – construing experience and enacting interpersonal relations – depend on being able to build up sequences of discourse, organizing the discursive flow, and creating cohesion and continuity as it moves along” (pp. 30-31).

According to Haratyan (2011) ideational metafunction is linked with transivity. In an SFL approach, transivity refers to how ideas are transmitted. There are six processes in which ideas can be transmitted: (1) material, an action verb of doing or happening; (2) mental, verbs categorized into cognition, perception and affection; (3) relational, adjectives and adverbs classified into intensive, attributive, identifying, circumstantial, and possessive; (4) verbal, verbs of direct or indirect report; (5) behavioral, verbs related with physiological and psychological behaviors; and (6) existential, as the processes of existing.

## 5. Discussion and findings

This section is dedicated to presenting the results obtained during the analysis of the song *Get Better* using Halliday’s framework of the three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

### 5.1 Ideational metafunction

The analysis of this metafunction takes into consideration the transivity aspect of the ideational function, thus, the analysis used the six processes mentioned in section 4.2 Table 1. shows the findings of this metafunction and the six processes of transivity. Some examples are included for reference. Verbs are kept in their original tense as examples.

Table 1. Transivity processes

Process	Number	Percentage	Example
Material	26	13.27	go, meeting, made, rests, close, wore, walking
Mental	26	13.27	need, get, know, wanted, hope, pretend
Relational	27	13.78	better, cold, orange, happy, younger, ripped
Verbal	1	.51	told
Behavioral	11	5.61	listening, sleeping, sound, watch, smiling
Existential	105	53.57	I, you, we, us, these, am, are, was, were, will

Results show that the existential process (53.57%) is the most prevalent process in the song. The song uses a high number of references about personal pronouns (I, you, we, they) These results indicate that the song stands from a personal point of view, and it is directed to a specific person. Some examples include *I wanted you to know, I hope you will*. The song also includes

different forms of verb to be in different tenses (will, am, are, were, was). This finding indicates that the message of the song is referred to in the present, past and in the future. Some examples include *I am yours, you are mine, You were always a fan of that spread*. In general, it could be said that the song stems from a personal perspective as it repeats many times personal pronouns and uses the verb to be to show the reality from which the song was written from.

The second most used process is that related with the relational process (13.78%). This means that the songwriter utilized a number of adjectives to describe what were potentially true scenarios. Some examples of those adjectives include *better, cold, orange, white, yellow, soul-quietening, happy*. These finding may indicate that using adjectives when telling a story may portray a clearer scene for the other person. The songwriter may have used these adjectives to provoke a feeling of familiarity by describing the scenario to how things were or how things are.

The mental and the material processes were used equally (13.27% each) throughout the song. This indicates that the songwriter used both action verbs and perceptive or affective verbs equally. Most of the verbs for both processes are performed by the *I* person. This finding shows that the song depicts life experiences from a personal view. Some examples include *I still pretend, I know I will*. These examples may depict the closest to the reality of grief specially the mental process verbs.

The least present transitivity processes in the song are verbal (.51%) and behavioral (5.61%). The song only includes an example of verbal process. This example was used when the songwriter was telling a story *I was admonished and told to go back inside*. This finding suggests that the song is told from a personal perspective as stories were lived with a single occasion of outsiders in the I-and-you story. The examples for the behavioral process include *smiling at your phone, I am listening to a recording of you sleeping next to me*. The lack of more examples of behavioral verbs may indicate that the songwriter found difficult to relate to sensorial experiences.

## 5.2 Interpersonal metafunction

Considering Halliday and Matthiessen's definition of the interpersonal metafunction which is used to "inform or question, give an order or make an offer, and express our appraisal of and attitude towards whoever we are addressing and what we are talking about" (2014: 30). In this section, the mood, the tenses and the types of adjectives are analyzed.

The most used mood in the song was the declarative one (78.69%). This finding means that the author of the song used sentences which may related to facts or real situations experienced by him and which could be relatable to other persons. For example, *I'll start the day with tiramisu*. The author also used declarative mood to describe some of the scenarios. For example, *the cold whoosh of truck passing*. These findings are reflected in Table 2. below.

Table 2. Mood

Mood	Number	Percentage	Example
Imperative	11	18.03	Get better, my darling
Declarative	48	78.69	I am yours, you are mine
Interrogative	2	3.28	Shall we go in?

The next analysis is about the verb tenses used in the song (Table 3). The most prevalent tense used in the present tense (52.87%). Although the use of the present tense is the greatly used, it is relevant to state that some the experiences may also reflect future meaning. The use of the present tense indicate that the situations depicted in the song are current or have a feeling of being current and relatable. The second and third tenses mostly used are the future (18.36%) and the past tense (14.94%). The uses of the past and the present are link structures to the stories that are being illustrated in the present. An example is *Your shyness stoked my*

*boldness*. These examples connect the stories of the person *I* and *my darling* person portrayed in the song. Considering the connection with grief, the songwriter may have used different verb tenses as to show a greater link between the two persons: the alive and the deceased.

Table 3. Verb tenses

Verb tense	Number	Percentage	Example
Present	46	52.87	am, cover, rests, hope, risk, stand, watch, know
Past	13	14.94	smuggled, wanted, threw, wore, stoked
Future	16	18.39	will need, will keep, will christen
Imperative	7	8.05	get,
Infinitive	5	5.75	to go, to sound, to be, to know

The last analysis for the interpersonal metafunctions is for adjectives (Table 4). The song has a total of 31 adjectives from which most adjectives are positive (96.77%) and only a short amount is for negative adjectives (3.23%). This finding indicates that although the song is about grief, the songwriter used positive adjectives throughout the song to depict only the best experiences with the deceased person. Some of the positive examples include *I'll christen this new era with the smell of freshly baked bread, a younger you and a younger me, happy birthday*.

Table 5. Adjectives

Adjectives	Number	Percentage	Example
Positive	30	96.77	better, cold, orange, white, soul-quietening,
Negative	1	3.23	cold

### 5.3 Textual metafunction

Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) definition for textual metafunction includes "construing experience and enacting interpersonal relations – depend on being able to build up sequences of discourse, organizing the discursive flow, and creating cohesion and continuity as it moves along" (p. 31). This textual metafunction analysis closely relates to the main question of this article which is to understand how the song *Get Better* portrays in a fictional manner the reality of lose and bereavement specially during pandemic times.

[Verse 1]  
 Hallelujah  
 I'm listening to a recording of you sleeping next to me  
 A cappella  
 I'm listening to you cover Elliot Smith's "Angeles"  
 It's these times I'll need if you go  
 It's these times I'll need if you go, so

In this verse, the lyricist is talking about the things he will be doing in the future if anything were to happen to his loved one. There are a few ambiguities. It is unclear to this point who *you* refers to, although we know the song is partially written based off of a poem written to the lyricist's girlfriend. It is also unclear what the person is going through. It is also unclear what meaning the verb *go* is taking.

[Chorus]  
 Get better, my darling  
 I know you will  
 Get better, my darling  
 I know you will  
 Get better

In the chorus of the song, the lyricist uses the phrase “get better” which is commonly used when someone is sick, and we wish them well. We can then infer that the person is sick or going through an illness. At this point, *you* is now referred to as *my darling*. *My darling* is still an ambiguous term. It is unclear what relationship do the lyricist and the you person have. Considering how language is constructed with choices (Eggins, 2004). It could be stated that the lyricist chose to use the phrase “my darling” so the listener could relate to the song’s meaning and interpretate as their own. Meaning “my darling” could be any one of their loved ones, parents, children, friends, siblings, etc.

[Verse 2]

I’m drawn to the motorway  
The cold whoosh of trucks passing  
This nighttime under sodium light  
The orange spread is soul-quietening  
A younger you and a younger me  
Meeting at The Serpentine  
I am yours, you are mine

The second verse is hard to interpret. The reason why is because it seems to be disconnected from the previous verse and chorus. However, it could be interpreted as a link to the third verse. This second verse is considered to be a thought of the person while driving to see their “darling person”. The thought is very descriptive about that moment (lines 1-4). In the following lines of verse two (lines 5-7), we could interpret that the relationship between the persons is romantic, that of lovers. The lyricist is being reminiscent of the time they met. He is also mentioning the way they profess their love.

[Verse 3]

Happy birthday  
Staff smuggled in a card I made  
It rests under your pillow  
When out of ICU,  
You’ll cringe at all the “I love you”  
The card retired the life of one biro  
At this time, I wanted you to know  
At this time, I wanted you to know

During verse three is getting clearer the situation in which *my darling* is. It is at this point that we know that the person is in fact sick and in a hospital. We could infer the person is comatose or greatly sick as the lyricist mentions the person will leave the ICU (Intensive Care Unit). When the lyricist mentions that the staff smuggled in the card it can be interpreted as the lyricist being unable to get in contact with his darling person. The end of verse three is a connection to the following chorus which is mentioned a second time in the song.

[Verse 4]

I’ll start the day with tiramisu  
Raise a spoon to frontline workers  
An underfunded principle  
They risk all to be there for us  
A younger you and a younger me  
Meeting at The Serpentine  
I am yours, you are mine

Verse four covers topics related with the pandemic situation. Similarly, to verse two, this verse also seems to be quite disconnected. The lyricist is talking about certain activities he will do while nodding to Frontline workers and principals who were the ones mostly “in the trenches”



when the pandemic first hit in 2020 (lines 1-4). The rest of the verse is similar to that of the second verse. The lyricist reminisces about the time they met and the way they profess their love.

[Verse 5]

You were the baker  
I'll christen this new era with the smell of freshly baked bread  
Your Nutella, I'll keep it in the cellar  
You were always a fan of that spread  
Six months on, there's a car crash outside  
The fire brigade using the jaws of life  
No flush at night to sound your return  
I still pretend you're only out of sight

Verse five is also slightly tied with topics related with the pandemic. It was concluded that some people adopted certain activities as means to cope with the pandemic. In this case, the lyricist mentions how the person had decided to take on bread making as a pass time. At this point, it is clear that the person, my darling, has passed away. This is indicated by the phrase you were fan of that spread. This idea also ties with the true meaning of the verb gone in verse one. We now know that the person has died. There is a time jump within the stories of this verse. The lyricist is telling about a happening which may have triggered memories about the dead person. It is from this happening that the person realizes that after the months that have passed is less likely that the person is going to return. This idea of being unable to recognize when a dead person is dead and not coming back is referred as a delusional state by Joan Didion (2005).

[Verse 6]

Front garden bouquet, I threw it at the fire brigade  
I was admonished and told to go back inside  
From the living room window  
I stand and watch the white sheet go  
Over the family car and I close my eyes  
I still pretend you're only out of sight in another room  
Smiling at your phone  
I still pretend you're only out of sight in another room  
Smiling at your phone  
I still pretend you're only out of sight in another room  
Smiling at your phone  
I still pretend you're only out of sight in another room  
Smiling at your phone  
I still pretend

More of this delusional state is presented in verse six, but before interpreting that, let us go back to the same happening developed in verse five. The lyricist mentions an accident and his curiosity to step outside or his willingness to help but being told to get inside. This may be interpreted as a precaution move since the song is still loosely based on the pandemic times and how people were supposed to be in lockdown. This situation, however, may have brought memories up. Seeing dead unfold from his house and his powerlessness to help may have triggered another memory. This is the second time being delusional happens. Similarly, to what Didion experienced with her husband's death and Howarth's view on grief, it seems hard to let go of the loved one even after death. It is reiterated in this verse that the person is still unable to let his darling go. This withholding may also be a coping mechanism attached to grief.

[Verse 7]

A younger me, a younger you  
Meeting at The Serpentine

The beginning of spring, you wore those yellow ripped jeans  
Your look defined my 2009  
Your shyness stoked my boldness  
“Shall we go in?”, I smiled  
Your hand warmed walking through the gallery

Verse seven is a complete reminiscing stage. Here, the lyricist brings back the theme of when he and his darling met. In this verse he is more descriptive about the memory. The lyricist takes us back to that moment by being explicit about the details of their encounter. These types of reminiscing are also elusive to Joan Didion and her husband death. In a way, she kept her husband alive while keeping the thought of him alive. Køster (2020) refers as spectral traces of deceased to those objects of memories that are still attached to the living person.

[Outro]  
(Get better \*laughs\*) \*tape rewinding\*  
I know I will  
(Get better \*laughs\*)  
My darling, I know I will

The outro of the song is quite similar to the chorus. The main difference is that the chorus referred to the other person *getting better* after falling ill. However, in the outro the pronoun changed and now it refers to the first person, the lyricist. In the fictional sense, where the darling person died, the lyricist is wishing himself to get better after losing someone. This self-soothing could be interpreted as a resolution from and to the person in grief.

## 6. Conclusion

This article was an attempt to use the SFL framework developed by Halliday to analyze a song. The analysis consisted of using the three metafunctions of the SFL approach to understand how the song *Get Better* portrays in a fictional manner the reality of loss, grief, and bereavement specially during pandemic times. The article presented a general background context of the band and the song. This was followed by a condensed literature review of the concepts of grief and the link between grief and art. The article also presented an overview of the concept of SFL and the definitions of metafunctions by Halliday and Matthiessen.

The most substantial part of this article was the analysis conducted of the song. In this section, the song was analyzed from the ideational, interpersonal and textual perspectives. The findings include how the songwriter used mostly declarative structures in the present tense to depict how a bereaved person goes through life when a dear person dies. The song depicted quiet closely a reality that some people lived while in pandemic and lost a person. The use of SFL allowed for a deeper understanding of how artists use current events and mix the reality and fiction of undone happenings, grief being one of them. At the end, understanding grief from an artistic way may help sooth bereavement as some people relate to it and not feel alone. As Joe Newman (2022) stated on a radio program, “it [grief] doesn’t get better; you get used to it”.

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