

**DOUBLY–NEGATING COMPLICATEDNESS OF UNDOING LOVE:
A STYLISTIC READING OF *I CAN'T UNLOVE YOU*
BY KENNY ROGERS**

Akun

English Department, Faculty of Humanities, BINUS University
Jln. Kemanggisian Ilir III No. 45, Kemanggisian-Palmerah, Jakarta 11480
akun@binus.edu

ABSTRACT

This was a research about the role of linguistic features in contributing to the overall meaning of a song entitled I Can't Unlove You by Kenny Rogers. The goal of the research was to prove that special linguistic features used in the song played a significant role in conveying the meaning of the song. This was a library research by identifying and elaborating the special linguistic construction found in the song lyric text. It is concluded that the use of double negation combined with invented negative verbs has successfully build up the idea of impossibility in undoing love. This double negative expression is needed because love intricacy and complicatedness can only be expressed in a stylistically special way where common expressions are unable to reach the intended meaning.

Keywords: *stylistics, double negation, love intricacy, undoing love*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengenai peran ciri linguistik dalam memberikan kontribusi pada keseluruhan arti dari lagu berjudul "I Can't Unlove You" oleh Kenny Rogers. Tujuan penelitian adalah untuk membuktikan bahwa ciri linguistik khusus yang digunakan dalam lagu berperan penting dalam menyampaikan makna lagu tersebut. Penelitian merupakan studi kepustakaan dengan mengidentifikasi dan menguraikan konstruksi linguistik khusus yang ditemukan dalam lirik lagu tersebut. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa penggunaan negasi ganda dikombinasikan dengan penciptaan verba negatif berhasil membangun gagasan ketidakmungkinan melepas cinta. Ekspresi negatif ganda diperlukan karena keruwetan dan kerumitan cinta hanya dapat dinyatakan dengan gaya bahasa khusus, yang makna dimaksud tidak dapat diungkapkan dalam ekspresi umum.

Kata kunci: *gaya bahasa, negasi ganda, keruwetan cinta, melepas cinta*

INTRODUCTION

The way of conveying meaning can be quite unique and requires special use of linguistic features as to strengthen the aimed message. Songs, just like poems, mostly use specially chosen and arranged words, phrases or sentences—with economical use of them due to space and length limitation—to signify a bigger idea, especially if the idea is complicated. These carefully chosen words can even be invented or developed out the common existing expressions to support the main idea of the work. Take the word “*unlove*” as an example. This word is used in the title of the song to be discussed in this writing. More than the uniquely chosen words, the song also makes use of special language structure: the double negation in combination with the special vocabulary mentioned before. The title of the song is an example *I Can't Unlove You*. This special song undoubtedly needs a special approach called stylistics to get into the deeper meaning of the song. How can the complicatedness of undoing love be communicated thoroughly through linguistic features? This study attempts to answer the question through the stylistic analysis of the song lyric focusing on the elaboration of the double negative expressions.

Stylistics

Understanding a piece of artistic work, especially a literary work with a special style in expressing ideas through written words, needs sound knowledge of both linguistic and literary elements and styles of the work. This interdisciplinary approach—later known as stylistics—“*the study of the use of language in literature*” (Abrams, 1999: 307) has been one useful tool in elaborating and understanding specially crafted literary work such as the song *I Can't Unlove You* that will be the subject of this study.

Stylistics is somehow much criticized for its weaknesses as too hard or too soft in its attempt to understand literary works, sometimes labeled as too ambitious or too technical, as quoted by Watson and Zyngier (2007:vii):

“In the 1960s and 1970s this was in part to be expected for an essentially inchoate interdisciplinary endeavor. Linguists felt stylistics was too soft to be taken too seriously and tended to introduce irrelevant notions such as performance data and interpretation; literature specialists felt that stylistics was too hard, too mechanistic and too reductive, saying nothing significant about historical context or aesthetic theory, eschewing evaluation for the most part in the interests of a naïve scientism and claiming too much for interpretations that were at best merely text-immanent.”

A famous linguist, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, has even strongly criticized the vague impression of Stylistics and its vanishing popularity that “*nobody has ever really known what the term ‘stylistics’ means, and in any case, hardly anyone seems to care... Stylistics is ‘ailing’; it is ‘on the wane’; and its heyday, alongside that of structuralism, has faded to but a distant memory*” (Simpson, 2004:2).

However, beyond the debates of being too soft or too hard, or foregrounding certain emphasis on something inside or outside the literary texts, the vagueness and unpopularity, the focus on the study of literary texts through their linguistic features in order to arrive at certain meanings can still be an interesting alternative. Here, again the science of Stylistics—“*a critical approach which uses the methods and findings of the science of linguistics in the analysis of literary texts*” (Barry, 2009:196) plays an important role in coping with the literary work with some special linguistic features, a work with a linguistic set of uniqueness.

“Stylistics is a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language. The reason why language is so important to stylisticians is because the various forms, patterns and levels that constitute linguistic structure are an important index of the

function of the text. The text's functional significance as discourse acts in turn as a gateway to its interpretation. While linguistic features do not of themselves constitute a text's 'meaning', an account of linguistic features nonetheless serves to ground a stylistic interpretation and to help explain why, for the analyst, certain types of meaning are possible. The preferred object of study in stylistics is literature, whether that be institutionally sanctioned 'Literature' as high art or more popular 'noncanonical' forms of writing."(Simpson, 2004: 2)

The fact that primary emphasis is placed upon language in the attempt for interpretation shows that stylistics considers that the language of a literary work plays a very crucial role in producing meanings due to language various elements considered as linguistic structure such as linguistic forms, patterns, and levels.

Simpson has also emphasized that there are two “caveats”—needed cautious considerations—when relating stylistics to literature and language regarding language creative use, especially on the question of which one is more important:

“The first is that creativity and innovation in language use should not be seen as the exclusive preserve of literary writing. Many forms of discourse (advertising, journalism, popular music – even casual conversation) often display a high degree of stylistic dexterity, such that it would be wrong to view dexterity in language use as exclusive to canonical literature. The second caveat is that the techniques of stylistic analysis are as much about deriving insights about linguistic structure and function as they are about understanding literary texts. Thus, the question ‘What can stylistics tell us about literature?’ is always paralleled by an equally important question ‘What can stylistics tell us about language?’”(Simpson, 2004:3)

Simpson (2004) has also discussed the purpose of stylistics as to “...explore language, and, more specifically, to explore creativity in language use. Doing stylistics thereby enriches our ways of thinking about language and, as observed, exploring language offers a substantial purchase on our understanding of (literary) texts” (p. 3). Further, Simpson has added the three basic principles called into our attention in the practice of stylistics, easily remembered as 3Rs: *Rigorous, Retrievable and Replicable* (p. 4). Stylistic analysis should be rigorous because it should be based on an explicit framework of analysis through well thought-out models of language and discourse which give us explanation in how to process and understand the work language patterns. The stylistic analysis should also be retrievable in the sense that it can be redone by other analysts by retrieving or copying the analysis model in drawing stylistic conclusion based on a consensus of agreement about meaning of the mainly used stylistic terms. Lastly, a stylistic analysis should be replicable where others can verify the used methods on the same text or other texts and expect to have similar results.

To map the possible levels of language that become the common targeted stylistic analysis, Simpson has outlined the following helpful language levels down with their language study technical terms:

Table 1 Simpson's Language Levels and Technical Terms

Level of language	Branch of language study
The <i>sound</i> of spoken language; the way words are pronounced.	phonology; phonetics
The patterns of <i>written</i> language; the shape of language on the page.	graphology
The way words are constructed; words and their constituent structures.	morphology
The way words combine with other words to form phrases and sentences.	syntax; grammar
The words we use; the vocabulary of a language.	Lexical analysis; lexicology
The <i>meaning</i> of words and sentences.	semantics
The way words and sentences are used in everyday situations; the meaning of language in context.	pragmatics; discourse analysis

(Source: Simpson, 2004:5)

Barry (2009) has stressed “*how the technical linguistic features of a literary work, such as grammatical structure of its sentences, contribute to its overall meanings and effects*” (p. 196). Thus the final purpose of stylistic analysis is to show how effective are the technical linguistic features in contributing to the literary work meanings so that the readers or audience can effectively get the conveyed meanings.

In relation to this writing topic, the syntax or grammar of the song will be the focus of discussion, especially in its relationship with double negation.

Double Negation

Double negation is mostly considered inappropriate in spoken and written Standard English except for playful or humorous use. “*Someone, somewhere, will dislike this sort of double negative because it is needlessly opaque and sounds stuffy. If it obtrudes, even when you think you are being amusing, it will not amuse*” (Wilson, 1993:154). In literary use however double negation is quite acceptable and common. In this literary context, despite its rare use, this special expression can be very useful where common expressions cannot reach the intended meanings. In the past, this double negation was so common. Chaucer and Shakespeare used them in their works because they found the expressions powerful and effective in articulating the indirect literary messages, as can be seen in the following quotation from Wilson (1993:154):

“Eighteenth-century grammarians decided that since two negatives made a positive in mathematics and logic, they must do so in spoken and written English too. This was not always so, however, and the double negative remains one of the best illustrations of what was once a perfectly acceptable locution being driven by the decisions of grammarians, not out of the language, but out of Standard use. Chaucer used double and even triple negatives, and so did Shakespeare: these were simply powerful, heavily stressed, multiple negatives. And many speakers still use these constructions today, even though they are now shibboleths that mark speakers of Vulgar English.”

It is an undeniable fact that language is just as dynamic as existing and developing contexts where it is needed. In literary expressions, certain grammatical structures are made possible for the sake of meaning even grammatically they are considered as wrong or inappropriate in term of standard correctness and formality. Regarding the doctrine of correctness, many common people, after long arguments, have come to a rigid conclusion that there must be only one correct form of language use. In this context, they apply only the doctrine of correctness which is surely not good enough in dealing with complicatedness of language use. Then another doctrine, called the doctrine of appropriateness (Wilson, 1993:115-116) is needed:

“The truth is that in many language matters appropriateness, not correctness is the doctrine to be heeded. Years ago Charles C. Fries pointed out that the dominant characteristics of the language of those who used only Vulgar English were not double negatives or mistakes in case or failures of agreement but a consistent poverty of expression, an inability to avail themselves of the myriad resources English has to offer, not just in vocabulary, but in syntax and other grammatical and stylistic matters as well. You have many choices before you, rich possibilities from among which you may select language appropriate to every context you encounter. That, and not correctness, should be your goal. And since the language is in a constant state of change and variation, appropriateness is a particularly sensible doctrine.”

Choices of stylistic expression are there to be used and appropriated with the contexts faced in everyday language encounters. So, the double negative constructions as one of the styles are still in use even in a modern song such as “*I Can’t Unlove You*”.

In some cases of double negations, the sense of litotes (understatement) is promoted by making “a positive statement indirectly by stating a contradictory proposition, as in ‘It was no minor matter’, meaning ‘It was a major matter.’ The same effect is achieved with certain double negatives, as in ‘She’s not unlike her mother’ (Wilson, 1993:274). Double negatives juxtaposed one after another, however, do not always result in or intentionally mean positive meanings. There is a possibility that the expression is used for emphasis (Emphatic Negation, Wouden, 1997:243-245; Wilson, 85) or corrective (Corrective Double Negation, Puskás, 2012:615-8). In terms of width of usage, Wilson (1993:67) has mentioned Black English as:

“The most frequently characterized by its use of multiple and double negatives, by its own special pattern for the use of the several forms of the verb and auxiliary be, by its having no inflected possessive case for nouns, by its usually lacking the third-person singular present tense -s ending on verbs, by its considerably different vocabulary, and by a number of pronunciations distinct from those of other American regional and social dialects”

So, double negation has been naturally a part of everyday communication in African American. Out of this context, double negation is also in use for certain purposes, and songs are among them just like Kenny Rogers’ *I Can’t Unlove You*.

METHODS

This is a library research of a song using stylistics. The song lyric is analyzed through its linguistic features as to reveal the dominant style used in the song. The double negative expression is identified and discussed to prove that it contributes to the overall meaning of the song.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I Can’t Unlove You is a simple song in terms of conveyed message clarity. It is about a man (presumably the persona is male) who has broken his love relationship with his girlfriend. All tokens of love such as postcards, love letters, pictures, decorative tokens, and mementos have been thrown away as to hopefully forever forget the sweet moments and relationship. However, getting rid of those symbols of love cannot wipe away his love feeling towards the girl. The efforts seem useless. This first stanza content is then followed by the result of his being unable to forget his love and replace it. This is signaled by his inability of not to think, not to feel, not to hear, not to say, not to remember anything about her lover and not to love her as a whole. The persona expresses his hard feelings after his actions of throwing away memorabilia of his lover and his efforts and continuing wishes to be able to forget her. These attempts are strengthened through his use of analogical metaphors of “interstates and old songs” that can keep going on no matter what happens, and he wishes he can learn from those things to go on living by forgetting her. He says that he can just wake up without her, his arms not around her, if –he tells himself–he is supposed to have this destiny. But, again, he cannot change his feelings towards her even though he has tried his best, and finally he conclusively remarks that it is impossible to do. The following is the song lyric.

I Can't Unlove You
Sung by Kenny Rogers
Written by Wade Allen/Robinson Kirby

Postcards and letters
And pictures made to last forever
To be boxed up and tossed away
Knickknacks and souvenirs
In an afternoon, they're out of here
They'll disappear without a trace
But what they mean to me
Can never be replaced

[Chorus:]

I can't unthink about you
I can't unfeel your touch
I can't unhear all the words
Unsay all the things
That used to mean so much
I wish I could unremember
Everything my heart's been through
And finding out it's impossible to do
Oh, it's no use
I can't unlove you

Interstates and old songs
Like time they go on and on
I guess I could learn to do the same
I could wake up without you
These two arms not around you
Tell myself it's meant to be this way
No matter how I try I can't change

[Chorus]

I wish I could unremember
Everything my heart's been through
And finding out it's impossible to do
Oh, oh, it's no use
I can't unlove you

What is interesting in the song is the way the persona expresses all the situations using double negations through invented verbs. This is stylistically a sign of complicatedness where the existing verbs are not good enough to convey the meanings. The following discussion will attempt to prove this.

Outer Simplicity versus Inner Complicatedness

The main idea of the song lies on the expression in the title “*I Can't Unlove You*”. Literally, it means “I am unable not to love you” or “I cannot undo my love to you” or slightly different “I cannot stop loving you”.

Actually, the persona can on the surface express his feelings in a simple and positive linguistic construction “I (can) love you always” based on the inversion of the existing double negation “I can’t unlove you” because as De Swart and Sag (2002:374) have stressed “*the double negation is logically equivalent to an affirmative sentence...*”, “*although this is not always so..*” (Wilson, 1993:154). Therefore, this seemingly amiable facade is not satisfactory because it is only half speaking about the outer problem where he is still in love with the girl and she is not his anymore. It does not speak about his bitter fact that he has loved her in such a way that he can’t stop loving her and throw away all his love towards her since the first time they become lovers. Further, “I (can) love you always” is so positive that it leaves no mark at all of even a slight problem, while in reality the persona is now facing the biggest love problem. Therefore, it is obvious that the positive construction is not good enough. What about a single negation: “I can’t stop loving you”? or “I can’t love you anymore”? Still, they are insufficient because there is no idea of breaking up in the first and there is no idea of “still loving you and can’t stop loving you” in the second. So, in term of degree of formality, the double negative construction is an informal and simple way of saying something more complicated. It is informal (or considered non-standard) by the use of contracted form of “can’t” and invented form of “unlove”.

There are some other double negative constructions that support the above main idea of “unloving”. The following quoted lines show five other invented verbs always preceded by expression of inability:

*I can't unthink about you
I can't unfeel your touch
I can't unhear all the words
Unsay all the things
That used to mean so much
I wish I could unremember
Everything my heart's been through*

Inability of Undoing

The special style used in the song is marked by the consistent use of “can’t” to show the persona’s inability in undoing many things about his feelings and experiences towards the girl. This “can’t” is placed right before the invented verbs, stressing that he is unable to undo many sweet memories about his girlfriend. The invented negative verbs using prefix un- themselves can mean a special emphasis of inability put on the main positive verbs *think, feel, hear, say, and remember*.

From Unthinking to Unremembering

The persona starts with the most difficult part of human experience in dealing with separation i.e. thinking of the loved one. When the persona says that he can’t *unthink* about his lover, through this double negative he strongly indicates that he used to think about her and now he cannot forget about her. His inability to *unthink* about her signifies his helplessness in cancelling or undoing his thoughts about her in the past and at this moment. This expression is stronger and more precise in comparison to positive construction “I (always) think of you” or “I can think about you” because these positive constructions are both missing the essence of the message i.e. the persona’s inability to undo and cancel all his thoughts about her during the (sweet) past moments and during the current state of (bitter) moments. The double negative “*can’t unthink*” has exactly conveyed the intended meaning of double situations: the persona’s bitter fact of separation with his lover and his still mulling her over all this time.

Then the persona moves to his sense sensation experience of feeling the lover’s touch that he can’t undo, cancel or erase. He claims that he *can’t unfeel* her touch. It means her touch has been a

good sensational experience for him and its sensation keeps lingering in him, that he can't stop sensing her touch and he is unable to undo all the sensation. From touch sensation he moves to sense of hearing that means a lot in such a way to him that he is unable of not *unhearing* all her words (presumably sweet words). This means that he has tried hard to forget all those sweet words but finds himself fail to do so. The words keep being heard and it understandable because those words have meant a lot to him. Besides his inability of unhearing all the words, he is also unable to cancel all the things—meaningful things—which he has habitually said to her. He confesses that he "...can't *unsay* all the things that used to mean so much".

Those things have colored their relationship and he has felt they mean a lot to him, therefore the separation is something hard to face because there are two situations just like the previous situations. First, the persona has heard and said sweet things to and from his girlfriend while now sadly he has lost all these sweet words. Second, the persona admits that even though he wants to, he cannot undo the saying of all these sweet words by him or by her. The two situations indicate his dilemmatic internal conflict, leaving him with no better way out. He can run from the bad situation by for example forgetting the sweet words, but he cannot lie to himself that deep down his heart he still clings to the words. Again, to best describe this internal conflict, the double negation "*can't unsay*" can represent both situations and meanings depicted by the song.

The last double negative, still related to dilemmatic situation, is concerned with memory. Apart from being unable to undo sweet thoughts, touches, words and things mentioned earlier, the persona still mentions conclusively that actually he really wishes to forget everything about her by saying "*I wish I could unremember everything my heart's been through*". This time the double negation moves beyond formal grammar "negative-negative" (can't un-Verb). The first negative is replaced by conditional construction using "wish" showing that he yearns for the reality to be different from or opposite to what he has at this moment. It is obvious that this first negative here is in the form of reality negation through the wish: "*I wish I could...*" (the reality is *I can't*, still the same as the other negations). The second negative is in the same form as the previous ones i.e. *unremember*(un-Verb). The persona hopes that he can undo his memory activity of keeping remembering the girlfriend, but of course he can't, that's why he needs the conditional expression "wish" to communicate his inability in "not remembering" her.

This last double negation is somehow saying of something more comprehensive because, first, it talks about everything the persona's heart has been through, and second, the act of "not remembering" is more difficult since it deals with memory and unconsciousness. All things that he has attempted before (unthinking, unfeeling, unhearing, unsaying) do not work out, and thus constitute a dilemmatic problem for him and they are buried or repressed in his unconscious mind, but still ready to get out and unconsciously influence him any time. So, although consciously and intentionally he tries to forget everything about her, his unconscious mind will do the opposite. He wishes not to remember her, but he keeps remembering her; he wants to undo all memories he has with her, but he can't do it. This complicatedness of state can be best conveyed using the double negative expression by making use of conditional *wish* and created un-verb *unremember*.

All special double negations used in this song contribute to the main idea represented by the title of song "*I can't unlove you*". This is a final conclusive confession after trying hard through throwing away both physical love tokens and mental or spiritual memorabilia. The physical detachment is successful, but the persona can't detach himself from the inner psychological emotions such as his thoughts, feelings, and memories about the girl friend.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion has proven that sweet experience of loving someone can be complicated for the later life when separation has to happen. There is a moment in life when someone has to face double sides of the same love: the person's still loving someone and the must-leave loving experience. When this complicatedness has to be communicated precisely through literary expression such as song to the readers or audience, a special style of expression is needed. Here, this love intricacy can only be depicted through a special style of writing by making use of uncommon and seemingly redundant linguistic features such as double negation. This idea is also strengthened by the nature of double negation as an informal way of sharing ideas, meaning when necessary the conventional and formal language construction can be violated. Therefore, the invented construction is also made possible in order to reach the conveyed meaning. In this study, the double negation has been combined with the creation of invented verbs "unthink, unfeel, unheard, unsay, unremember, and unlove" to successfully communicate the love intricacy. These expressions are not even found in a formal dictionary, signifying that it is impossible to undo all the good experience about the lover.

It is obvious that the expression of impossibility through the non-existent (read: impossible) vocabulary is an effective way of conveying meaning. The overall meaning of the song i.e. it is impossible to undo the love (unlove) of the lover has been fully achieved through the combination of double negation with non-existent but created vocabulary.

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