



## Cognitive Dissonance as a Trigger for Coherence in Lyrics (on the material of 'Hallelujah' by Leonard Cohen)

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**Abstract.** The research focuses on the paradoxical role of cognitive dissonance as a trigger of coherence. By identifying cognitive dissonance in the lyrics of 'Halleluja' by L. Cohen, analysing the pattern of its distribution between the lines and by establishing connections between stanzas which serve to clarify the initially unclear passages the researcher concludes that cognitive dissonance triggers the reader's / listener's need to interpret the lyrics and thus contributes to the overall coherence of the text.

**Keywords:** cognitive dissonance, coherence, lyrics, poetic discourse, Hallelujah, Leonard Cohen

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Научная статья

## Когнитивный диссонанс как триггер когерентности в песенном дискурсе (на материале песни Л. Коэна «Аллилуйя»)

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**Аннотация** Исследование фокусируется на парадоксальной роли когнитивного диссонанса в качестве триггера когерентности. В ходе выявления когнитивного диссонанса в тексте песни Л. Коэна «Аллилуйя», анализа его распределения между строками и установлением связи между строками, которые способствуют прояснению изначально неясных отрезков текста, исследователь приходит к выводу о том, что когнитивный диссонанс создает у читателя / слушателя потребность интерпретировать текст песни и тем самым обеспечивает его общую когерентность.

**Ключевые слова:** когнитивный диссонанс, когерентность, песенный дискурс, поэтический дискурс, Аллилуйя, Леонард Коэн

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## INTRODUCTION

When listening to song lyrics one sometimes wonders how seemingly separate segments of the text may be unified into a coherent whole. Moreover, this unification at times seems to be resultant from the clear dissonance of the images portrayed in the text. These observations have brought about the scientific interest in the role cognitive dissonance may play in establishing – however paradoxically this may sound – coherence within a poetic text, in particular the lyrics of a popular song.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the lyrics and the establishment of possible mechanism that allow cognitive dissonance contribute to coherence in the text it is necessary first of all to give a brief overview to the notions of coherence and cognitive dissonance within the framework of modern linguistic theory.

## COHERENCE

The question of what turns a set of sentences into a coherent whole (a text) has always been the focus of linguistic research. This question has acquired particular significance for poetry owing to its practically unlimited range of linguistic means the poets can resort to in order to express themselves and communicate with their readers.

There exist different understandings of coherence and its relation with cohesion, but the general consensus from the 1980s seems to be that coherence reflects the network of concepts pertaining to the main topic(s) of the text. The perception of the network may even vary from reader to reader, making coherence subjective.

Later researchers suggested that coherence results from cohesion, where cohesion is understood as local connectedness and coherence as the global one [Безуглая, 2011]. Professor Bezuglaya proposes that coherence needs to be correlated with the levels of the language and further classified in the following way: phonetic, grammatical, lexical and textual. In particular, lexical coherence can be subdivided into coherence based on semantics, imagery and associations. The importance of semantic correlation for the establishment of coherence (even in cases when both verbal and non-verbal means are used to create poetic texts) has also been stressed by K. A. Slutskaya [Слущкая, 2011].

On the whole, the study of semantic coherence is of particular interest in our research as it correlates with the study of cognitive dissonance.

## COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Cognitive dissonance is another phenomenon, widely discussed not only in linguistics but also in music studies, literary research, social psychology, etc. (for details see [Ирисханова, 2014]). In psychology cognitive dissonance is treated as mental discomfort, caused by clashes of contradictory units of knowledge. In cognitive linguistics the notion of cognitive dissonance is pioneered by V. Z. Demyankov [Демьянков, 2011], who introduced it into the discussion concerning discourse interpretation.

K. M. Iriskhanova [Ирисханова, 2014] spoke about two modes of cognitive dissonance manifestation (the external mode resulting from the clash between the socially accepted worldview and the poet's worldview, and the internal mode revealed through the linguistic modifications which can occur on all levels (from phonetic to discursual)).

In this research we will try to analyse the song lyrics in terms of cognitive dissonance present in the text and will attempt to see how it contributes to the semantic coherence of the poem.

## MATERIAL

The material for the study was the full lyrics of the song 'Hallelujah' performed by the Canadian poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen (1934–2016) in London in July 2008. The lyrics were transcribed by us from the YouTube video<sup>1</sup>, as there exist several variations of the lyrics on the Internet, and the fluctuations in wording or emphasis between versions may result in the changes in interpretation and coherence.

The lines in the transcript were numbered for the convenience of the analysis. The full text of the song is included in Table 1 below, and Table 2 will contain only select lines.

The lyrics consist of six stanzas containing eight lines each, the last two lines invariably including 4 instances of 'hallelujah'. Stanza 6 has five more instances of the word, and between lines 24 and 25 there are four more instances of the word, but we did not number these lines because they are not sung by Leonard Cohen in the video. All the other lines are performed by him and the words 'hallelujah' are sung by back vocals in unison with him.

Therefore, a conclusion may be drawn that the six cases of epiphoric repetition including the word 'hallelujah' and the general abundance of this lexical unit make it significant, attract the reader's / the listener's attention and for these reasons justifies making it the starting point for our analysis.

<sup>1</sup>Found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrLk4vdY28Q>

We can also observe that the song is divided into two halves by the instrumental part (variations of the tune performed on their own, without the singers' involvement), and each group of three stanzas seems to be united by a topic which will be demonstrated by the analysis of the lexical units and the imagery employed in the text.

## ANALYSIS

At the first stage of the analysis we determined the meanings of the lexical units in the text and where necessary provided additional information. For the convenience of presentation this was done in the order in which the words appeared in the text, with the stanza and / or line number provided. The word 'hallelujah' will be discussed first because of its obvious importance for the lyrics.

'Hallelujah' is an exclamation that means 'God be praised' and is uttered in the course of worship or rejoicing<sup>1</sup>. The word is originating from Hebrew meaning 'praise ye the Lord', where 'ye' is the second person plural pronoun.

The first stanza requires substantial explanations, as the poet makes use of several spheres of knowledge (of the Bible and of music).

David was future King David of the Old Testament, who first became known as the young shepherd who killed Goliath. He was also a harpist who played very beautiful music which explains the noun «chord» and the expression «and it pleased the Lord». It is also possible that the word «secret» sounds similar to the word «sacred», and thus «secret chord» may be understood as «sacred chord», so polysemantic effect is created, opening the possibility of several interpretations of the text.

Lines 4 and 5 required special research which is cited below.

As Sofia Rizzi explained<sup>2</sup>, "the line 'the fourth, the fifth / the minor fall, the major lift' is in fact a description of the chord sequence taking place under those words. Here's the breakdown:

- 'The fourth': This phrase sits on the fourth chord of the scale, or sub-dominant chord (IV) of F major.
- 'The fifth': The melody moves up one note to the fifth chord of the scale, the dominant (V) of G major.
- 'The minor fall': Again, the melody moves up one note here to the sixth chord, the submediant (vi) of A minor. The 'fall' in this phrase is referring to the minor, or 'fallen' third of the chord.

<sup>1</sup>URL: <https://bitly.cx/q3YP7>

<sup>2</sup>URL: <https://clck.ru/3Ax824>

– 'The major lift': This is a first inversion chord of the fourth, or sub-dominant (IV) of F major. The 'lift' refers to the chord changing from a minor to a major chord, and in the process 'lifting' the harmony. There is only one changing note in this chord, it moves from A–C–E to A–C–F.

It's Leonard Cohen giving a subtle nod to musicians..." and the listeners can hear how the melody goes down and then up.

The adjective «baffled» may be understood as «puzzled» but also as «restrained or regulated (a fluid, sound)», which creates a polysemantic effect.

In the second stanza (lines 9–14) the poet again alludes to several spheres of knowledge.

In line 9 the reference is made to an integral element of any religion – the ability to resist temptation. Lines 10 and 11 tell the story of King David and Bathsheba, in which King David failed the temptation and took another man's wife for his own (but from what union King Solomon was born). There are some factual inconsistencies – King David saw Bathsheba bathing from the roof of his palace, not her «bathing on the roof», while «the moonlight» may be a general cliché from love poetry. If we assume that King David is addressed in the stanza (the 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun «you» is used), then in lines 12 and 13 a different person is addressed, because the allusions are to a different story – that of Samson and Delilah. However, the two stories share a common element – in both instances the men succumb to the women's charms, albeit with different consequences. Also, as a king David did have a throne, and Samson, when defeated by Delilah, lost his power that can be symbolised by a broken throne.

The verb «overthrow» has two meanings: to remove forcibly from power and the archaic meaning of knocking or throwing to the ground. In the first meaning it can refer to the story of Samson being defeated by Delilah and in the archaic meaning to the story of David metaphorically smitten by his love for Bathsheba.

In the third stanza (lines 17–22) the religious topic is continued with the lexemes «God above», «pilgrim», «seen the Light», but they are not specific for any Biblical story, more likely to modern American discourse where people who have just found faith address large gatherings like stadiums. Line 22 contains the word «hallelujah», but it is accompanied by such attributes as «cold» and «broken», which again need additional research. «Cold» may mean lacking affection or emotion, and «broken» may be a transferred epithet in the meaning of «having given up all hope, despairing».

Lines 19 and 20 create an image that completely clashes with the previous context. The verb

«outdraw» has two meanings: (1) (of a person or an event) to attract a larger crowd than another person or event; (2) to draw a handgun more quickly than another person. Both meanings can be correct in the context – the poet refers to a competition with someone, and it could be a fellow artist, as well as the line can be an allusion to the Wild West where a lot of disputes could be resolved with a duel, in which the participants had to quickly draw their revolvers out of their holsters and then shoot. The word «crime» in the next line seems to tilt the balance in favour of the second meaning, but Leonard Cohen has used polysemantic effect in the previous stanzas.

After stanza 3 there is a long instrumental passage which creates a certain line of demarcation in the song.

Stanza 4 (lines 25–30) does not seem to contain any religious themes, the topic seems to be human relations and everyday life. Line 28 stands out because of the unexpected image of a «flag on the marble arch» and then the mentioning of «the victory march», both of which can be allusions to historic events or monuments. There is no consensus as to what arch is meant. One of the possible monuments can be Titus' Marble Arch in Rome which symbolizes the final victory of Romans over the Jews<sup>1</sup>. Another option was Washington Square Arch in Manhattan, New York City. Cohen lived in New York when he wrote the song, and soldiers had marched under that arch at the NYC Victory Day parade in 1946<sup>2</sup>. There is also a general tradition that when a castle, a fortress or a city is taken, the victor flies their flag above it, so the image may be general, not specific.

Line 30 practically repeats line 22; the only difference is that «broken» is replaced with «lonely»,

which suggests sadness caused by absence of company. On the one hand, «lonely» shares its root with «alone» (line 27). At the same time, the verb «used to» implies that this state of affairs is over, the protagonist is clearly in love with someone, so the appearance of lonely creates cognitive dissonance and will require an effort of the listener / the reader to interpret the text.

Stanza 5 (lines 33–38) continues the theme of the relationship between the lyrical hero and his beloved, focusing on its physical side. Still, the religious component is present in the expression «Holy Dove» (which is the representation of the Holy Ghost, one of the Holy Trinity). However, this expression can also be understood as an interjection, expressing fascination or excitement. Line 38 echoes line 14, as both contain the verb «drew» and «Hallelujah» and contain the expression of joy and satisfaction.

Stanza 6 (lines 41–46) to a certain extent summarizes the song and establishes the context in which it is performed. «Here» from line 25 is specified as «London» in line 43. The word «wrong» from line 44 anaphorically points to stanza 5, where the failed relationship is described. The periphrasis «Lord of song» (line 45) is reference to David who pleased the Lord with his chord in stanza 1 and allows us to understand that the poet rejoices in the fact that despite all the hardships he still has his gift of poetry and song through the final repetition of the word «hallelujah» (7 times). Another interpretation can be that in the long run there is nothing physical left after all the people he mentioned in the song, but their creations live on (hence only the word remains on the tongue).

The distribution of the themes in the lyrics can be found in Table 1. We have also marked the linguistic units which express the corresponding topics with colour and different fonts (bold and underlined).

Table 1

DISTRIBUTION OF THEMES IN THE LYRICS

	The lyrics	The Bible	Religion	Music	Relations	History
1	Now I've heard there was the secret chord	David				
2	That <b>David</b> played, and it <b>pleased the Lord</b>	David				
3	But <b>you don't really care</b> for <b>music</b> , do you?			+	+	
4	It goes like this, the <b>fourth</b> , the <b>fifth</b>			+		
5	The <b>minor fall</b> , a <b>major lift</b>			+		
6	The <b>baffled king</b> composing <b>Hallelujah</b>	David	+			
9	Your <b>faith</b> was <b>strong</b> but you needed <b>proof</b>		+			

	The lyrics	The Bible	Religion	Music	Relations	History
10	You saw <b>her bathing on the roof</b>	David				
11	Her <b>beauty</b> and the moonlight <b>overthrew</b> you	David				
12	<b><u>She tied you to a kitchen chair</u></b>				+	
13	She <b>broke your throne</b> , and she <b>cut your hair</b>	Samson	+			
14	And <b>from your lips she drew</b> the <b>Hallelujah</b>		+		+	
17	Well, maybe there's a <b>God</b> above		+			
18	As for me all I've ever learned from love				+	
19	Is how to <b>shoot someone</b> who <b>outdrew</b> you					+
20	But it's not a <b>crime</b> that you'll hear tonight					+
21	It's not some <b>pilgrim</b> who claims to have <b>seen the Light</b>		+			
22	No, it's a cold and it's a very broken <b>Hallelujah</b>		+			
25	Well people I've been here before					
26	I know this room and I've walked this floor					
27	You see <b><u>I used to live alone before I knew you</u></b>				+	
28	And I've seen your flag on the <b>marble arch</b>					+
29	But listen <b><u>Love, Love</u></b> is not some kind of <b>victory march</b> ,				+	+
30	No, it's a cold and it's a very lonely <b>Hallelujah</b>					
33	There was a time <b><u>you let me know</u></b>				+	
34	What's really <b><u>going on below</u></b>				+	
35	But now, <b><u>now you never even show it to me</u></b> , do you?				+	
36	I remember when <b><u>I moved in you</u></b>				+	
37	And the Holy Dove <b><u>she was moving too</u></b>				+	
38	And <b><u>every single breath we drew</u></b> was <b>Hallelujah</b>		+		+	
41	I've done my best, <b><u>I know it wasn't much</u></b>				+	
42	<b><u>I couldn't feel, so I learned to touch</u></b>				+	
43	I've told the truth, I didn't come here to London just to fool you					
44	And even though <b>it all went wrong</b>				+	
45	I'll stand right here before the Lord of song	David		+		
46	With nothing, nothing on my tongue but <b>Hallelujah</b>		+			

Table 2

## LOCATION OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Lines	The lyrics	Semantic phenomena, including cognitive dissonance
<b>Stanza 1</b>		
3	But you don't really care for <b>music</b> , do you?	Cognitive dissonance because of change from the Biblical story to a personal relation; «music» associated with «chord» in line 1;
4	It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth	
6	The <b>baffled</b> king composing Hallelujah	Polysemantic effect; «king» associated with David in line 2
<b>Stanza 2</b>		
9	<b>Your</b> faith was strong but <b>you</b> needed proof	Unclear who the addressee is; «faith» is associated with «Lord» in line 2
10	<b>You</b> saw <b>her</b> bathing on the roof	Unclear who «she» is, as there is no female person mentioned in the preceding text
11	<b>Her</b> beauty and the moonlight <b>overthrew</b> you	Polysemantic effect, as «overthrew» has several meanings
12	<b>She</b> tied you to a kitchen chair	
13	<b>She</b> broke your throne, and <b>she</b> cut your hair	Cognitive dissonance because of «kitchen chair» in line 12 and «throne» in line 13; «throne» is associated with «king» in line 6, while «cut your hair» makes reference to the Samson and Delilah story
14	And from your lips <b>she</b> drew the Hallelujah	
<b>Stanza 3</b>		
19	Is how to shoot someone who <b>outdrew</b> you	Cognitive dissonance because of a completely different topic
20	But it's not a <b>crime</b> that <b>you'll</b> hear tonight	Unclear who the addressee is; you in line 20 is different from the addressee in line 19
22	No, it's a cold and it's a very <b>broken</b> Hallelujah	Polysemantic effect
<b>Stanza 4</b>		
25	Well people I've been here before	
27	You see I used to live <b>alone</b> before I knew <b>you</b>	Unclear who the addressee is; clearly not «people» from line 25
28	And I've seen <b>your</b> flag on the marble arch	«Marble arch» creates cognitive dissonance with all topics before. Unclear who the addressee is
29	But listen <b>love</b> , love is not some kind of victory march,	Polysemantic effect: love as address and as a feeling «Victory march» is associated with «marble arch»
30	No, it's a cold and it's a very <b>lonely</b> Hallelujah	Cognitive dissonance – «lonely» clashes with «used to live alone»; See line 22 for similarities
<b>Stanza 5</b>		
36	I remember when I moved in <b>you</b>	Unclear the change from «you» to «she»
37	And <b>the Holy Dove she</b> was moving too	Polysemantic effect
38	And every single breath we drew was Hallelujah	See line 14

Lines	The lyrics	Semantic phenomena, including cognitive dissonance
<b>Stanza 6</b>		
41	I've done my best, I know it wasn't much	
42	I couldn't feel, so I learned to touch	
43	I've told the truth, I didn't come here to London just to fool <b>you</b>	Cognitive dissonance as unclear what «truth» is meant Lines 43 and 44 are on different topics despite the conjunction «and» The addressee is different from the person implied in lines 41 and 42
44	And even though it all went wrong	Connected to lines 41 and 42 and anaphorically refers to stanza 5
45	I'll stand right here before the <b>Lord of song</b>	Periphrastic reference to stanza 1

In Table 2 we have marked the location of cognitive dissonance and the lines which required additional research to be interpreted. Some lines have been removed if there were no instances of cognitive dissonance, polysemantic effect or other linguistically significant phenomena. Several lines were left in the table even if they did not contain any of the above means, but they were important for the adjacent lines.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis has demonstrated that Leonard Cohen touches upon five topics in his lyrics: Biblical stories, Religion in general, Music, Relations and History. Table 1 demonstrates the location and distribution of the topics among the stanzas. Biblical stories are alluded to in stanzas 1 and 2; general religious topics are mentioned in stanzas 2–4. Music is touched upon in stanza 1; human relations come into focus in stanzas 4–6, with some elements present in stanzas 2 and 3. Stanzas 3 and 4 also contain references to history. Stanza 6 contains elements of all topics except for references to history, thus summarizing the poet's ideas.

In Table 2 we can see both the lines with cognitive dissonance and with generally unclear passages. We can see that cognitive dissonance is present in all stanzas except for stanza 5; however, stanza 4 contains two instances of cognitive dissonance. Absence of clarity results from the use of personal pronouns (2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns 'you' may refer to different addressees in adjacent lines and the shift between 'she' and 'you' in some lines); such instances are present in all stanzas. Another possible source of imprecise meaning is the polysemantic

effect (examples can be found in stanzas 1–5). For the clarification of such points it is necessary to turn to other lines of the lyrics, but not all cases can be unequivocally interpreted.

## CONCLUSION

The research has demonstrated that cognitive dissonance is present in song lyrics and is distributed among the stanzas relatively equally.

Cognitive dissonance is found in different lines in the stanza (3 – 5 – 3 – 4, 6 – 0 – 3), with line 3 being the most typical in the analysed text (three instances out of six). Studies based on a large number of texts may allow to better establish whether this is a general pattern or whether the location of cognitive dissonance is individually chosen by the author. In the first case coherence may be established by the expectation of a manifestation of cognitive dissonance in certain parts of the stanza.

Cognitive dissonance is created by a number of methods:

- 1) a change of topic;
- 2) the use of a topic completely different from the other topics of the text;
- 3) the use of a lexeme which has no correlations with any other lexemes in the text and
- 4) the use of the lexeme which clashes with the topic discussed in the context.

Cognitive dissonance is also provided by the use of personal pronouns – the third person pronoun «she» may refer to female characters in the Biblical stories or the poet's imaginary partner, and the second person pronoun «you» may suggest several addressees (the audience, the characters from the



stories the author alludes to or even real people from the poet's own life), and the absence of contextual signs of support in favour of one of the options strengthens the resulting cognitive dissonance.

The need to understand the lyrics makes the reader / the listener turn to different parts of the text in search of additional information, and these attempts establish textual coherence.

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