

Language and music



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“ Understanding music requires norecuperation[SKS1]of a fictional world, and no response to imaginary objects.... the meaning of music lies *within* it; it can be recovered only through an act of musical understanding, and not by an “ assignment of values” of the kind provided by asemantic theory[SKS2]” (Roger Scruton)

Music is an important aspect of everyday life: We can take it with us wherever we go and use it to set the scene or create a “ soundtrack” to our lives. It has the power to influence our moods and emotions and can stir up feelings and old memories within the first few notes. Music is intertwined in all cultures and has been for as long as humans have had the ability to make it. It has been said that musical instruments and the production of music (in any form) predates the earliest evidence of writing. Music is everywhere.

In order to understand music it is important to define what it is that *makes* something music. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* , the definition of music is;

“ The art or science of combining vocal or instrumental sounds to produce beauty of form, harmony, melody, rhythm, expressive content, etc.; musical composition, performance, analysis, etc., as a subject of study; the occupation or profession of musicians.”

(Oxford University Press 2014)

According to this definition, the basis of music is sound. Sound is defined as a sensation caused by a vibration of air particles. It cannot be seen by the naked eye and, at some frequencies, cannot be heard by the human ear.

Music does not exist without sound as it is a product of various combinations of “ *vocal or instrumental sounds*”. Everything that is considered “ musical” is made from sound but not every sound is musical. Sounds exist whether we are listening to them or not. Many sounds are unintentional in that they are a necessary result of an action. They are not being created purposefully and are often just in the background of everyday life. Although we hear them, we do not have to listen or *focus* on them if we choose not to. Music, on the other hand, is an intentional object. It is purposefully created to be heard, we must focus on music and actively listen to it. Music is acousmatic. When we hear it we tend to detach the sound from its production and focus on the sounds. This differs to the non-musical sounds we encounter everywhere.

Music is a temporal occurrence but can only be discussed in spatial terms. Although there are specific terminologies related to music, there is no need to be an expert in order to enjoy a piece or discuss it with others. In order to properly consider the meaning of music and define it, we apply semantic terminology and compare music to language. It is easy for us to break both language and music down into their smallest forms and compare the similarities between both although we may have an issue with the starting point of music as we would have to determine the smallest form, which could be a sound, a note or even a beat, depending on how a person views the creation of music and their knowledge of how music is formed.

If we were to break language down to its smallest form and work our way up, so to speak, we could say that the smallest part of language is a phoneme. From there we can conclude that a phoneme then becomes a morpheme, a morpheme then becomes a phrase, which then becomes a clause, which

then becomes a sentence, and so on and so forth. As a native speaker, we are able to create numerous combinations of words that can be understood by others who share our language. In order for things to be understood, it is said that there needs to be some form of common knowledge or common ground. It is also important that there is some context to what is being expressed so we can deduce meaning from what we are hearing/reading. If we break down music into its simplest form, we begin with sounds that are combined to make different pitches. These become phrases and sequences that are combined to create whole pieces of music. If we compare language and music on this level, we can see that the two share similarities in structure. When discussing the meaning of music itself, there are a few things to consider. Firstly, we must distinguish what we mean by music and the form it is in. If we are talking about written music, one must have at least a basic knowledge of musical notation in order to understand what they are reading.

Music is the universal language.” Aphoristic as this phrase may be, it does relate something many people think about music: music is expressive. But if music is expressive, what, exactly, does music express? For that matter, how does music express? Is the content or manner of expression of music the same as the content or manner of expression of language? In answering questions such as these, we promote previously empty cultural aphorisms about music like the one presented earlier to the status of meaningful claims.

David Lewis highlights two important features of language – language as an object and language as a practice. I will present a view of the nature of

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music held by Peter Kivy, comparing it to Lewis' conception of language. I will then argue that by Kivy's view of music, music is not a language, though it has more language-like properties than Kivy admits.

To briefly take stock, we might highlight four general properties of language we should look for in the determination of whether or not something is a language:

1. Syntax – Lewis' grammar operations. Determine legitimate strings.
2. Semantics – Lewis' meaning. The meaning of a well-formed string is the situation it describes in a set of possible worlds.
3. Truth Values – Derived from comparing the meaning of a sentence with our world.
4. Conventional Activity – a population arbitrarily determines a language used by conventionally using the language to express truth.

Peter Kivy endorses a formalist view of music. The formalist doctrine is that music is a type of sound structure. Generally, we think of a structure as something we can appreciate visually; the word usually evokes mental images of certain spatial relations of objects to other objects. But according to the formalist, sound structures are “temporal patterns of sound” (emphasis added). To put this in a vocabulary familiar to musicians, sound structures are just combination of types of sounds (such as pitches, percussion, etc.) that occur in some timeframe. Music has formal properties and sensuous properties: a piece of music's formal properties differentiate it from other pieces of music; i. e. certain notes are played in a certain order, the piece is a certain speed, and there are certain rhythms. And music's ‘

sensuous properties' boil down to the fact that – shocker – music is a heard medium: we hear and notice different aspects of sound events when we experience music.

Kivy's view of music directly supports the inclusion of one of the important features of language in music's nature. He says that music has a " special kind of order: the order of syntactical structure." He says that this order is governed by rules (of a sort); these rules concern how different sounds should be combined in the production of a musical work. For example, it is a staple of the syntax of certain schools in western music that there should be a return to the tonic at the end of a musical phrase. This syntax differs for different genres of music, much like it does for different languages. Certain chords can be used in certain genres, and not in others – for example, you will see flat V chords used in chord progressions in jazz, but not most pre-modern forms of classical music.

But I think we have reason to believe that the nature of musical syntax is very similar to the nature of linguistic syntax. First of all, I question the assertion that the rules of linguistic syntax are stricter than the rules of musical syntax. For example, take the English grammar rule that the first letter of the first word in a written sentence is capitalized. I think this easily qualifies as a syntactic rule of written English; however, prominent writers have violated it throughout history (E. E. Cummings is one obvious example), and people today often violate it when talking to one another through electronic media such as texting on the phone and messaging online. I think we still want to say that these people are using English – they are just temporarily disregarding a grammar rule of English, which is more of a

regularity than a law. However, though some rules of linguistic syntax are not absolutely strict, I do think that there are rules which are inviolable. Lewis' rule that there is a finite set of elementary constituents paired with meanings that we can use in the construction of sentences is of paramount importance when using a language. I can't type out a random assortment of characters and expect that configuration to be an English sentence.

Similarly, certain combinatorial grammar rules are absolute.

And it seems to me that musical syntax has very similar characteristics to this conception of the characteristics of linguistic syntax. There are certain rules which can be bent; a piece of music can preserve its status as a piece of music in a certain genre regardless of whether it follows a specific syntactic 'regularity' of this kind. This is similar to syntactic rules like capitalization mentioned in the previous paragraph. Then there are certain rules which must be followed for a piece to be classified as a member of a certain genre – relate this to how a string must follow a certain instantiation of the grammar rules Lewis established to be characterized as a member of one language rather than another. Then there are certain rules any genre of music must follow to be music rather than mere noise. This is similar to syntactic rules any language must have; a language must follow the general rules Lewis gives us, in one form or another.

We can also see that the activity of music is analogous to the activity of 'language' that Lewis describes. Music is not just an entity, but also a social activity concerning musicians and listeners, wherein musicians make certain noises and they expect their listeners to respond a certain way. And I see no reason why we wouldn't say that this activity is in some way arbitrary,

however limited that arbitrariness is by the hard-wiring of our brains to enjoy certain sounds.

The parallels between music as ‘ language’ do not stop there. Music shares the ability to infer something about the state of mind of a composer or musician with language (substituting ‘ speaker’ for ‘ composer or musician’). Playing a guitar solo in a minor pentatonic scale allows us to infer one (admittedly broad) set of things about the mind of the guitarist, while playing in the blues scale allows us to infer something else. And we often make the same inferences as many other listeners. These inferences might also be wrong – as they might be in the case of ‘ language’. And Kivy’s view that these inferences are not ‘ in the music’ doesn’t stop us from saying that we make these inferences; we can say that we respond ‘ by convention’ to a certain sound structure in a certain way without saying that there is anything about the sound structure that makes us respond this way.

So far, so good, for the view that music is a language. Nothing that I have said thus far about Kivy’s view of music has conflicted with the definition of language Lewis gave us. And although I haven’t gone into the nuts and bolts of correlating Lewis’ grammar rules with musical syntax, it’s not hard to see how a story could be told relating them – in every way but one: what could we say corresponds with the meanings described in rule one and two? Kivy qualifies his formalist definition of music: “ absolute music is a sound structure without semantic or representational content”.

This is a big problem for a proponent of the view that music is a language. One of the essential characteristics of language is its status as something

which can communicate meaning; some might call this property the most important property of language. And on initial reflection, Kivy's claim seems to hold a lot of weight. How could music talk about situations in the external world? A song might represent 'victory' or 'striving' or what-have-you in some obscure, abstract sort of way; but it certainly does not have the power to describe in the incredibly detailed, content-rich way a language can. Music could never have the power to express the meaning of such sentences as "My flight to Los Angeles was delayed because of poor conditions on the runway." This is a crippling observation in particular for anyone who thinks that my method of deciding whether music is a language is valid – without semantic content, two of the four properties of language Lewis defined go down the tubes. The absence of semantic content in music obviously bars us from saying that music has semantics; and, because music is free of semantic content, truth values are gone as well, as truth values are products of comparing the meanings of sentences with the world.

The avid supporter of the music-as-language project has two avenues open to them at this point. They might object to Kivy's view the music is free of semantic content; or, they might object to the view of language – specifically, the view of semantics – that Lewis gives us. I'll start with the objection to Kivy.

An obvious route someone objecting to Kivy's determination that music is free of semantic content might take is saying that it does have semantic content – and this content is emotion. Music represents emotions the same way language represents the situations its sentences describe. Maybe the ability of music to describe things in the world is much more limited than

language, but its ability to describe emotions is even better than natural languages' ability. Thus music should be described as ' a language of the emotions'.

Kivy has a response to this claim, but I find it to be unsatisfying. He says this assertion gets you " from enhanced formalism in letter and spirit to a musical semantics in letter, not spirit, and enhanced formalism, still, in spirit." He thinks that music can say nothing interesting or significant about emotion, and somehow this yields the result that music does not have emotional semantics. But the ability to say something interesting about what it denotes is not what defines the semantics of language – it is the ability to say what it says that defines language. In other words, it is the ability of sentences to denote at all which makes them linguistic. If music can do this, then it has semantic content.

The problem is, we are wrong to say that music denotes emotion in the first place. I think Kivy is right when he says that emotion is a " heard property of the music" . Music does not ' represent' sadness; it just is sad, the same way that an apple just is red. And the reason we perceive these emotions in music is due to the fact that music can formally resemble how humans look and act when they feel certain emotions. Unfortunately, I can offer no positive reasons to accept this conception of emotion in music other than emotions are certainly a part of music in some capacity, and this formulation of their relation to music is the least problematic one I know of.

And perhaps I can pose some problems with representative views of music that serve my intuitions well: for one, many people think that to be a real

language, every sentence in that language that denotes a state in the world can be translated to a sentence in another language. How might one go about translating something music ‘says’ to English? Attempts usually produce a clumsy, single-word emotional descriptor, which varies from person to person. Another thing people think stems from a representative medium is the presence of truth values. We can say of a linguistic proposition that it represents our world, or it represents a situation not in our world; propositions of the first type are true, and propositions of the second type are false. But what would we say about music corresponds with a state in the world? It seems a very odd practice to listen to a phrase in Beethoven’s Fifth and say of it that it is ‘true’ or ‘false’.

On the other hand, the supporter of a music-as-language view might challenge the definition that Lewis provides of semantics. He might use music to help define language, as Andrew Bowie does in his book *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*. He says “if people understand a piece of articulation – which is apparent in terms of its effects in social contexts on behavior, reactions, feelings, and so on – it must mean something.” Bowie equates language with Lewis’ ‘language’, the social activity, and discards the properties of ‘a language’. Because music is a social activity by which people effect specific changes on others’ behavior or feelings, music has meaning, and therefore is a language.

But Bowie betrays his own cause when he tells us what follows from this new definition of language in a quote by Bjørn Ramberg: “We can, if we like, interpret all types of things as speaking”. This definition of language allows us to call all types of things language that push against our intuitions on the

subject. Arriving late to a meeting is now language, because others' thoughts are influenced to think worse of me for being tardy. Playing a sport with other people is now language, because their behavior is altered when they respond to my sporting actions. Maybe you want to call these things language, but I suspect the majority of people do not.

It is important that a practice we choose to call language should have aspects of 'a language' and is used by the practice of 'language'. This successfully delineates language from non-language. The presence of truly semantic content is one of the principle factors in deciding whether something is a language. Even though music seems to have every property of the practice Lewis identifies as 'language', it cannot be a language.

Edit: took out a sentence that doesn't make sense without the rest of the paper.

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1. [SKS1]the recovery or regaining of something.

“ the recuperation of the avant-garde for art”

[SKS2]a theory which assigns semantic contents to expressions of a language. Approaches to semantics may be divided according to whether they assign propositions as the meanings of sentences and, if they do, what view they take of the nature of these propositions.