

## A Kaleidoscope of Meanings: A Comment on Philip Barnard “What Do We Mean by the Meanings of Music”

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**ABSTRACT:** In this response paper, I argue that types of meanings in linguistic utterances which lie beyond propositional meaning can hardly be subsumed in only one category called *implicational meaning*. Many of these levels of meaning allow for restricted comparisons of their correspondence to levels of meaning in musical utterances.

Submitted 2012 January 06; accepted 2012 July 13

**KEYWORDS:** *levels of meaning, music and language*

ALL of us know the Indian story of the blind men who are led to an elephant to learn what it is like. One says that an elephant is like a rope, because he touched the tail, another says that he is like a pillar, because he touched a leg and the third says that he is like a solid pipe because he touched the tusk, and so on. The moral of the story, of course, is that you see the true elephant only if you take him as a whole, and not only focus on single parts of it. While this may be true for elephants, it is not always true in science. Sometimes the detailed observation of tusks, legs, tails and trunks tells us more about elephants than the overall view.

The target article by Philip Barnard aims to create a design of an overarching architecture of the human mind in form of interacting systems which produce meaning in music and language. In order to do that, he distinguishes a neuronal, a mental and a behavioural level of subsystems. Their complex interaction produces two types of meaning, one being *propositional* and the other *implicational*. Building on work by Cross and Tolbert (2009), Barnard sees the difference between musical and linguistic meaning in that music relies more on what he calls implicational meanings, while language is organized to convey propositions. While this is a very welcome and generally very plausible theoretical sketch about the general configuration and evolution of cognitive architectures, neuronal networks and communicative behaviour in humans and other species, I believe that research could take some important steps ahead if we took a closer look at different domains of meaning in concrete utterances, be they musical or linguistic or something in between. Maybe we see more looking at particular form-meaning pairs in precise domains of meaning, if we want to know what language and music have in common, what sets them apart and how they are related in the evolution of *homo sapiens*. Barnard's binary categorization clearly does not capture the whole range of meanings conveyed in linguistic utterances and maybe it is also in these other domains that we can find revealing similarities and shared form-meaning pairs. I will try to give a bird's eye-view on different levels of meaning we can observe in linguistic utterances.

*Propositional meaning* can be described in terms of truth conditions: We know which conditions must hold in a possible world for a sentence to be true or wrong in this world. Lexical meanings and the relations of arguments, conjunctions, quantifiers and other operators set up what we call *semantics* in linguistics. At a closer look, we find that it is not the attribution of the values *true* and *false* that distinguishes linguistic propositional semantics from other forms of meaning, since bee dances (*There is the nectar!*) or musical leitmotifs (*Siegfried is approaching!*) can also describe a world to which we can attribute these values. The very difference seems to lie rather in special operators which I believe are hard, if not impossible to find both in music and in communicative systems of other species. Negation, quantification and deictic shifts out of the communicative situation seem to be better candidates for differences between communicative systems of other animals and music on the one side and human language on the other, than the possibility to attribute truth values. Bees cannot communicate something like *there is nearly no nectar* and not even Wagner could compose a meaning like *Siegfried didn't come yesterday*.

*Illocutionary acts*, first developed in modern times by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), but at the same time also one of the core concepts introduced in Wittgenstein's (1953) late philosophy, capture the interactional side of meaning in linguistic utterances: we assert, we ask, we instruct, we warn, in short, we act when we speak. There is no problem at all in understanding propositional

meaning as an instrument to achieve illocutionary acts: I can show you a picture of a fact that I perceive as being the case in the world we are referring to in order to instruct you or warn you or delight you, in short, to realize communicative acts which add to the construction of a meaningful social reality. I can act in many different ways using propositions, e.g., I can ask if you think that this proposition is true in our world, I can demand that you change something in the world to make it similar to a desirable world which we construct in our discourse by propositions or I can put a new piece of knowledge about our world into our discourse. Since illocutions are communicative acts grounded in social behaviour, the application of illocutions to musical meaning seems to be straightforward: If we keep out those illocutions which rely on propositions, we find that many illocutionary acts may be conveyed also by music, since musical events surely are actions in social communication (see Cross & Tolbert, 2009, and literature cited there). In linguistic utterances, illocutions like assertions and questions can be coded by special words (so called *performative verbs*), through syntax (inversion, Wh-constructions and so on), and by intonation, a term which, different to its use in music theory, means the phonological representation of pitch contours in linguistics. In most languages, rising boundary tones convey questions, while falls normally convey assertion. While these illocutions rely on propositions, others do not: Searle's (1969) *expressive acts*, which give hints about emotional states and attitudes of the speaker, and possibly also some *commissive* and *directive acts*, may reveal similarities to musical meanings on both sides of the sign, content and expression.

Intonation also is an important tool for *conversational structure* (Sacks et al., 1974). This is another domain of linguistic meaning, which serves to organise turn-taking in dialogues. Here we find cross-linguistically stable form-meaning pairs at boundaries of intonational phrases with rises indicating continuation and falls closures (Cruttenden, 1997). In conversations, this is interpreted as the maintenance (*I will say more*) or closure (*it's your turn*) of a turn. It is fairly plausible to think of rises and falls for turn organisation as the basic meaning for the linguistic expression of questions and assertions. Here we could try to find out whether closure and continuation in music are comparable in form and function.

This already opens a related dimension of linguistic meaning, which relates propositions to the flow of the discourse they further develop (Chafe, 1976; Krifka, 2007). The basic notions of *information structure* are related to our knowledge about the presuppositions of our discourse, which are given either by propositions of previous utterances or by pragmatic inference from the semantic frames of active discourse topics, and to those parts of our utterances which defer from these presuppositions. Presuppositions are the content of the *common ground* of our discourse, while those parts of utterances which make a difference are called *focus*. In a sense, this dimension of meaning is directly related to the two main forces which drive conversational implicature in Paul Grice's (1975) groundbreaking theory of how to make sense out of propositions by pragmatic means: *relevance* and *difference*. Relevance, or *relation*, as it is called by Grice himself, is a maxim which needs propositions to be attached to what is said (or represented in a different communicative channel) before, to the common ground in terms of the theory of information structure. The communicative principle behind focus is not discussed by Grice, but could be easily accommodated within his theory of pragmatic inference: difference. The corresponding maxim would sound like a commercial slogan: *Be different!* This maxim is hidden, because it is so obvious. It motivates for instance our meaningful interpretations of superficially senseless redundancy as in *war is war* or *a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose* (Gertrude Stein). We cannot represent the meanings of the repeated expressions in the very same way, but normally interpret first names of classes of referents and then features associated with these classes, resulting in readings which automatically project predicative structures like *war is cruel* or *a rose is red and a symbol of love and an object of art* (or whatever you might associate with *war* or *rose*). Linguistic utterances must be both relevant and different, otherwise they don't mean anything. The tension between relevance and difference might turn out to be an important restriction also on musical utterances.

*Emotional content* is conveyed in musical and in linguistic utterances. Intonation and speech rate seem to provide the major linguistic domains for this domain of meaning (Scherer, 2003; Kotz & Paulmann, 2007). With respect to emotion, music and language are directly comparable and it seems plausible that we will find parallel form-meaning pairs, with the difference that in music composers intend to evoke certain emotions, while in most linguistic utterances they are but indices of the actual affective state of the speaker.

A last domain of meaning I want to mention here is *social indexicality* (Eckert, 2008). When we speak and when we make music, we construct our social role. In language, we have rich lexical, syntactic and phonological options which we choose in order to build the social reality we find adequate. With respect to music, the difference between the social interpretation of listening to Jazz, Punk or Classical Music does not need any explanation.

In this comment, I have just identified six different domains of meaning we observe in linguistic utterances. I will not claim that this sketch of linguistic meanings is exhaustive or innovative, but rather draw attention to the fact that these levels of meaning are intertwined and correspond to

musical meaning in a complex and not in a simple manner. The major difference between linguistic and musical meanings lies in the lack of full-fledged propositions with a rich inventory of logical, pragmatic and deictic operators in music. All other domains of meaning can be found also in music and form a rich field for research. So Barnard is definitely right in claiming that propositions are what makes the difference between musical and linguistic meaning and his theory about the development of our cognitive architecture is quite convincing. But propositions surely aren't the only domain of linguistic meaning and I think that we can discover more relations between music and language and their evolution if we look at particular form-meaning pairs in all domains of meaning, including emotional, social, conversational and pragmatic meanings. For future research, I conclude that we should not always ask ourselves the big Faustian questions about "whatever holds the world together in its inmost folds", but rather develop more subtle questions. Tusks and trunks instead of elephants.

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