Parallel Structures between Language and Music

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Superficially music seems to bear little relation to the natural world around us in the way that visual and verbal arts do. In these arts, the relation between natural phenomena and their artistic representation is clearly apparent. In comparison to this music seems to bear little relation to the world around us. However, critical examination can show a correspondence between the artifice of music and the reality of the natural world. In this case it means a relationship between music and language; in particular, a relationship between linguistic prosody and music. In this presentation three proposals will be made to support this hypothesis.

1. Binary Structures

The first comparison to be made between language and music is the between double phrase structures in both music and language. The double phrase musical structure, known as the binary form, is one of the building blocks of western classical music. The simple binary form consists of two short sections of music, usually of the same length, and often similar in style. The first section ends on a musical half close, and the second section ends in a full close. Both sections combine to make one musical structure: hence the name the binary form.

Musicologists and music teachers have for a long time been using analogies drawn from the grammar of language to explain the binary form. With evidence from modern linguistics it can be shown that there is closer structural relationship between language and music than mere analogy. Three comparisons will be made to support this.

The first comparison is with the concept of adjacency pairs. The adjacency pair consists of the following features: (1) two-utterance length, (2) adjacent positioning of component utterances, (3) different speakers producing each utterance, (4) the component utterances being related to each other in such a way that they form a *pair type*. *Question-answer, greeting-greeting, offer-acceptance/refusal* are some examples of adjacency pairs. (Tsui, 1989:545) The adjacency pair is primarily a semantic concept, so, in order to make fruitful comparisons with music, this concept of the adjacency pair is to be linked to two prosodic structures.

The first of these two is the double stressed pair. Bolinger observed that probably the majority of well-executed longer utterances have a prosodic shape and organizational base that correspond to a question-answer pattern, or a theme-rheme pattern 1986:46). For Bolinger pitch change is the predominant factor in defining these prosodic phrases. The first phrase ends in a relatively high key or with a rise, thus creating a sense of temporary repose awaiting continuation in a high key. The second phrase fulfills this obligation then ends on a low fall thus creating a sense of finality. Similarities can be seen between the semantic structure in the adjacency pair and the prosodic structure in the double stressed pairs. Similarities between these two structures and the musical binary form can be seen in that in all three concept the first half ends in a half close, and the second in a full close.

The second prosodic structure and the third concept for comparison is isochrony at the exchange point in turn taking between two speakers. When the first speaker sets up a rhythm, with at least two prosodically salient points, the second speaker prolongs this rhythm, by placing the first prosodic prominence of the new turn on the next projected rhythmic pulse. (Auer, et al, 1999 :202).

These rhythmic and melodic, or intonational, features of the binary structure in language are similar to the structure of the simple binary form in music. In this way the rhythms of conversational exchange are emulated in musical phrases.

2. Rhythm in Communication

Innate biological rhythms are manifested in human activity (Chapple, 1980). In interaction between

two entities the cycle of action and inaction, of tension and relaxation, (ibid: 748) is matched with a mirror image in the other side, but at 180 degrees out of phase. In other words, when one is active, or tense, the other is passive, or relaxed, and vice versa. This alternation in sequence is a continuing one and where there are no overlaps, or stumblings or interruptions the two entities are said to be in synchrony. Chapple says humans require a certain amount of interaction each day. When individuals obtain a sufficient amount of synchrony or complementarity they will experience feelings of well-being, affection, love. From this it can be seen that the biological need for the fulfillment of the desire for rhythm in interaction is a source of the desire for and love of social interaction. Conversation fulfills a human biological need for rhythm in communication.

The biological need for the rhythm of interaction seems to be the physical aspect of what Malinowski in 1923 defined as phatic communion. According to Malinowski, "language in its primitive function and original form has an essentially pragmatic character; that it is a mode of behaviour, an indispensable element of concerted human action." (Malinowski, [1923]1999: 305)

It is proposed that that part of the satisfaction we get from music is that it replicates the rhythms of interaction, or communication, and the pleasures of phatic communion.

3. Meaning in Music

For many people the pleasure of music is enhanced when it can be associated with a visual image, or a narrative that can be expressed verbally. Sometimes music is composed as a deliberate description of an image. At other times, non-descriptive music is given an association. But, although a large and diverse amount of imagery may be ascribed to a piece of music, music itself cannot communicate verbal meaning.

The same can be said about the role of prosody in language. Without a verbal context prosody is meaningless, although prosody may change the meaning of that verbal context.

There are many studies on the role of intonation in languages, but they are always about the meaning of intonation when connected to words, verbal contexts, or narratives. The meaning of intonation on its own has remained almost indefinable, and such absolute meanings that have been ascribed to certain intonation patterns are so open-ended that they lack clear definition.

Thus the ways we interpret meanings in prosody and music are similar. The meanings of both systems of communication depend on the context within which they stand.

Conclusion

The three cases above have been put forward to illustrate the relationship between music and linguistic prosody. Similarities in the rhythms of binary structures show a physical similarity, whereas the discussions on rhythm and communication, and meaning in music are to show that we use similar psychological processes to encode and interpret music and language.

This concludes the brief exposition of some of the ideas that support the hypothesis, that music is an artistic representation of prosody in language.

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