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CONVENTION AND DIFFERENCE

RUFUS DUTS

ALBERT-LUDWIGS-UNIVERSITÄT, FREIBURG

The claim that music is language may be oft repeated, but it remains wholly unenlightening unless a sufficient explanation of one of these terms has already been given. On the face of it, music is entirely dissimilar to natural language, at least when conceived functionally, the one being categorised primarily as an aesthetic object, the other first and foremost as a means of communication. Of course, language can also be the object of aesthetic judgement, but the claim is not that music is poetry. Two in the first instance superficial characteristics at least are shared by music and language: the temporal form (risking Derridean deconstruction by taking the vocal manifestation of language as primary), and the fact that both are, or can be, in perhaps very different ways, understood – that is, are conveyors of meaning.

My intention here is not to defend or criticise the claim that music is language, but rather to show the way in which these two characteristics first ground at least the possibility of perhaps fruitful analogy. This will amount to showing how the form of each can be understood to ground the possibility of meaning for each. This in turn is intended to illuminate a path towards understanding meaning in general. I am, of course, scarcely able to offer anything more than a schematic outline of these considerations here.

My starting point is Saussure's linguistic analyses (as articulated in his *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, 1960) according to which the determination of any linguistic unit is given only in virtue of its differentiation from all other units, particularly insofar as it stands within, or conforms, series of oppositions. The claim expressed in Spinoza's formulation, *omnis determinatio est negatio*, which sounds as a refrain throughout the history of Western

philosophy from Heraclitus to Derrida, is here given a linguistic turn. Whilst the analysis of language in anglophone philosophy has almost exclusively taken either words or sentences to be the most basic meaning-carrying linguistic units, for Saussure these are already the abstractions of grammarians. For him, the task of identifying the *real* linguistic unit is perhaps insuperably problematic, but is in any case not necessary for an account of the way in which language means. Words are often to be analysed as compounds of further semantic elements, and might vary their meaning from expression to expression, and a sentence may not be understandable without its immediate context. In any case it is clear that differentiation, or, in Hegel's vocabulary, opposition and negation, is here the principle of individuation.

For Saussure, the meaning of the linguistic element is given by the system of differences within which it stands, the complex of oppositional relationships it bears to other linguistic elements. It is determined wholly by what it is not. Although this is intended to have universal applicability for all language, it can, in the case of natural languages, perhaps be most clearly demonstrated by reference to negatives. The word "untie" receives its meaning, most obviously, through the oppositional relationship it bears to "tie", but this would not be the only relationship of a system of differences constituting its determination. According to Saussure, these relationships take one of two basic forms: syntagmatic or associative. In an exclamation such as "Don't untie the prisoner!", "untie" bears syntagmatic – that is, sequential or successive – relationships to the other elements of the imperative, and an associative relationship to "tie" as well as to other negatives of correlative syntax: "undo", "undress", etc, and to other context related words: rope, knot, etc. Taken together, these relationships – and we have here only articulated a small number of them – form the system of differences which determine the meaning of "untie" in such an exclamation.

It is not altogether controversial to assume that the elements of music, whatever they may be – notes, chords, harmonies, phrases, movements, whole pieces (and it should not be necessary to state that the attempt to identify the basic musical unit is just as problematical as its linguistic correlative) – can be conceived in a similar way. The determination of the chorus section of a given pop song, for example, may be made primarily by its differentiation from the verse, just as the development section of a standard sonata form is what it is only in oppositional relationship

to the exposition. This method of analysis can equally be applied for harmonic determination: the chord of G in a piece in the key of C (Major or Minor) is determinable as dominant only in reference to the tonic, as well as for dynamic and timbral determination, and, of course, syntagmatically for rhythmical determination. My thesis is that the determination, which is to say the meaning, of any given musical element is a function of the system of differences within which it stands.

Of course, in the case of music, Saussure's categories of syntagmatic and associative will no longer be exhaustive. For the sake of completeness, I shall offer a schematic categorisation of musical difference. Later, however, we shall see how any such classification must remain radically contingent. The determination of any element of music is given by a system of differences of the following categorial relations: syntagmatic (in Saussure's sense), harmonic (in the broadest possible sense of relations of pitch), qualitative (including instrumentation, timbre, dynamics, etc.), associative (including relations that extend beyond the piece of music itself).

I speak of a system of differences, and examples have illustrated the oppositional relations that are constituted by such differences. In what sense, however, are these systematised and why? Saussure himself does not refer to systems of differences. Our reference to them is an attempt to respond to a fundamental problem of the differential analysis of language which Saussure himself barely seems to see. To return to the linguistic case, if a word receives its determination purely by negation, and if no procedure is given in advance for *limiting* this negation, that is, determining the negation itself, then every word stands in a negative differential relationship to every word other than itself. In this case, only one relationship distinguishes any one word from any other word: its relationship of identity to itself; but here we return to a *positive* theory of determination: a word is what it is because of what it *is*. The only way we can prevent Saussure's differential analysis of meaning from collapsing into a positivist account is to insist that the differential relationships within which a word stands are limited, that is, systematised, in advance.

The problem here, and the solution I propose, may be usefully illustrated by means of a musical example. The dominant chord G, which I referred to earlier, carries the harmonic determination it does not because it is simply a G, nor because it stands in differential

relationship to all other possible chords, but rather because it stands in a particular system of differential relationships, namely, the key of C. In other words, the key of C forms the systematic context or horizon within which G can first function as a dominant, it provides that hierarchical series of differences – or intervals – in which such a determination is first possible, and this means that before G can receive this determination, the key of C must be given in advance. Of course, the key of C itself is only an instance of the application of the tonal system of the West. Thus that G receives the musical meaning of dominant presupposes the system of differences that is the Western tonal system.

But what is it that determines that this system is given in advance? My answer – convention – of practical necessity laconic, will nevertheless require at least a little explication, again by means of further illustration. The claim is that the system of differences in which G functions as dominant is constituted by the conventions of the Western tonal system; putting the point another way: that I hear this particular chord of G as a dominant is determined by my understanding the particular system of harmonic differences in which it stands in terms of the conventional tonal system of the Occident.

Returning to linguistics, a word such as “untie” is to be determined, as we have seen, in any given context, by the syntagmatic and associative relations in which it stands. To take the associative case, we have already mentioned the most obvious relationships to “tie” and other negatives. Whilst there may be others of comparative importance, “untie” would seem to stand, at least in most contexts in which it is uttered, in no relation at all to “power-station”, for example, nor “Nietzsche”, nor “Ionic Greek”, nor even to “under”. But yet it bears the same abstract negative relation to all these as to “tie”, “undress”, etc. Consequently, it cannot be an unlimited system of negations which determines the meaning of “untie” in any given context, but a determined system of differences which is constituted in advance by convention, by the rules which conventionally govern the use of the word “untie” in the English language.

But convention here is not to be restricted to what might be called macro-socio-cultural conventions such as the occidental tonal system or rules for the deployment of particular words. After all, our chord of G will carry much more than merely a harmonic determination. A system of differences will also be determined by the immediate context. The musical meaning of any

instance of the G-chord within the piece may vary depending on whether it is used cadentially or not, for example, or on what position it is in, or on dynamics, timbre, instrumentation, or perhaps extra-musical references, etc. All these may serve to frame a context, to determine the system of differences according to which the G-chord receives its meaning. Similarly, the system of syntagmatic and associative relations in which the word “untie” stands will vary from utterance to utterance, from context to context.

These relations will also inevitably vary more or less from individual to individual. It is a platitude that I cannot understand Indian classical music, for example, except with an “occidental ear”, at least not before I have become sufficiently familiar with its musical conventions. A more telling illustration might concern someone arriving late to a concert, who, given that she does not know the piece already, will not understand the development section of the sonata in the same way as someone present from its beginning, since the syntagmatic relations in which the themes stand will be arranged differently for each. Clearly, also, a particular piece may bare extra-musical associative relations of a highly personal character for a single individual.

Despite their personal dimension, for our purposes such determinations will be categorised under the heading of convention, and in any case it will be found in practice ultimately impossible to separate the personal from the socio-cultural determination of any system of differences. And thus we arrive at a very broad and nomenclatorial definition: a convention in the sense employed here is anything which determines a system of differences in terms of which an element of music or language is understood. Expressed with a bit of jargon: a convention is that which structures a hermeneutic topology.

With this apparatus in place it may be suggested that music is similar to language insofar as both are systems of meaning which function in terms of convention and difference. The most remarkable difference, however, is, of course, that whilst language essentially fulfils what might be called a signifiatory function, musical signification is the exception rather than the rule – programmatic music being perhaps the obvious example – and music certainly does not need to signify in order to qualify as music; “music is about musical ideas” as the musicologist Eduard Hanslick put it. Whilst the question of the signifiatory character of language (thematized

famously by Saussure in terms of the difference between the signified and the signifier) does not lie within the scope of this paper, it is important to emphasise, in lieu of musicological debate, that the relations we have construed as the ground of musical meaning are not projected onto the music from the outside, as it were, but configure or conform the music itself. As the Argentinian composer Mauricio Kagel once said: “Composing is the process of inventing relationships”. Thus, on our account, there is no need to debate whether, for example, the melancholia of a particular piece is a property of the music itself or not. If we are to retain the language of properties, then we can respond that of course it is, since it is precisely those relationships which constitute the determination melancholia that *are* the music.

Before concluding my considerations I wish to turn briefly to what might rashly be thought to be a counter-example to the analysis of musical meaning I have outlined: twelve-tone serialism. In the absence of the conventional tonal system how can the elements of twelve-tone music be said to mean? That is precisely the problem. Twelve-tone music, and indeed serialism in general, remains inaccessible to the majority of Western ears, not because it is atonal per se, but because its conventions are largely unfamiliar beyond a musical elite. According to our analysis, despite being artificial in a way in which the Western tonal system is not, sufficient assimilation of its conventions renders twelve-tone music as equally capable of bearing musical meaning, of being musically intelligible, as the system it, with a red revolution, overthrew. What then is to be made of non-serial, post-tonal music, which may even intend to be radically unconventional? Sometimes one finds a composer – a notorious example being Boulez – going out of his way to explain his pieces to his audiences, to present them with a system of differences in advance for their interpretation. On the other hand, in order to make an artistic statement, composers have also chosen to pursue the ambiguity and diversity of meaning listeners themselves bring to their music, or have actively sort out the meaningless, the unintelligible – although an entirely unconventional listening will in general not be possible. For the sake of artistic creation, all that is perhaps more than acceptable for the theory of meaning we have sketched here.