Musical Quotation and the ‘Use-Mention’ Distinction

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Signs of Signs

‘Quotation’ is one of several terms (such as ‘sentence’, ‘period’, and ‘syntax’) that have been applied to music by analogy with their earlier linguistic usage. The depth of this particular analogy has remained underexplored. Particularly striking is the near-absence in studies of musical quotation of any reference to the extensive literature on quotation produced by philosophers of language. That is understandable, in view of the fact that most of the fine-grained semantic problems they discuss are irrelevant to music. It is still an open question however whether certain basic distinctions may not apply to both, and contribute to the somewhat elusive but substantial analogy between music and language.

Among its many aspects (grammatical, rhetorical, literary, ethical), what has most fascinated philosophers of language about quotation is the peculiar relation between the sign and its referent, the quoted item and its source. The problem has its classical formulation in Gottlob Frege’s On Sense and Reference (1892):

If words are used in the ordinary way, what one intends to speak of is their reference. It can also happen, however, that one wishes to talk about the words themselves or their sense. This happens, for instance, when the words of another are quoted. One’s own words then must designate words of the other speaker, and only the latter have their usual reference. We then have signs of signs. In writing, the words are in this case enclosed in quotation marks. Accordingly, a word standing between quotation marks must not be taken as having its ordinary reference. (Frege 1960: 58-59)

Here Frege in fact discusses two different kinds of quotation. It is one thing to speak about ‘the words themselves’; another to ‘designate words of the other speaker’. That occurs in direct speech, as in (1); the first kind is known as ‘pure quotation’, as in (2).

(1) Peter said: ‘Bankers are crooks’.
(2) ‘Bankers are crooks’ is a sentence.

What holds for both is that they are signs of signs. This distinction between regular signs and quotational metasigns coincides with that between ‘use’ and ‘mention’, that has become standard in the literature. We ‘use’ words as signs to say something; when we quote, we refer to those words (‘mention’ them) by transforming them into


metasigns. Inherent in this process is the indiscriminability of sign and metasign; indiscriminability, that is, in the absence of quotation marks or other clues. The proper use of quotation marks has therefore been an important theme in the philosophy of quotation, as it has branched out of mathematical logic. With a broadening of the discussion to include the practices of ordinary language, their status and significance has become one of the contentious issues.

Despite visual (and auditory) appearances, there clearly is an important difference between what is quoted in (1) and (2): what is signified is not the same. In (2) it is a grammatical string of words, in (1) what matters is what Peter said, the sense of his words, expressing a judgment about bankers. In this sense, the words are also used. We may draw further inferences from it, or add a judgment of our own, etc. (3).

(3) That ‘bankers are crooks’, as Peter said, is nonsense. From this we may conclude that the use-mention distinction is significant, but at the same time fluid: quite often an expression does double duty, both as a sign and as its own metasign.

Sometimes the words of a speaker are quoted without understanding, disabled as signs. In (4) the words are merely speech sounds, reproduced phonetically. As such they do not belong to the language spoken. In writing too, with or without understanding, we may quote from other sign systems, as in (5).

(4) Heinrich said ‘Wee gaits’, whatever that means.

(5) The stress pattern can be represented as ‘¶¶¶»|¶±’.

It is a linguistically remarkable feature of quotation that strings of words may acquire a different function in sentence syntax (2), and, more contentiously, that even non-linguistic objects may occupy a slot in the sentence (5). By fulfilling the function of words, they may become part of the lexicon. That is unlikely to happen with something like (5), but onomatopoeia is a familiar case of sound imitations that have been lexicalized (6). As long as they are unfamiliar, they may be highlighted as alien elements; with habituation they may become regular verbs and nouns.

(6a) The oboe did: ‘squeak!’.

(6b) The oboe ‘squeak’-ed.

(6c) The oboe squeaked.

A similar observation may be made relating to scare quotes. By fulfilling the function of a so-called or what you might call they often point towards a particular kind of discourse, or signal a novel sense given to the word. When introducing a word in an unfamiliar or technical sense, such as ‘use’ and ‘mention’ in the title of this essay, it is customary to use quotation marks, but it would be pedantic to keep doing so. In philosophical discourse they have become part of the lexicon. Rather than merely being a stylistically somewhat condemnable practice, scare quoting is something we continually do: we adapt the lexicon to our needs, changing the sense of words and phrases, borrowing from different kinds of discourse, and introducing novel expressions. The extraordi-

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3 Cappelen and Lepore (2007: 23) consider similar examples ‘fairly uncontroversial’.
4 For a recent discussion and references, see Mark McCullagh, ‘Scare-Quoting and Incorporation’, in Saka and Johnson (2018: 3-34). Cappelen and Lepore (2005: 56) call scare quotes a ‘speech-act heuristic’ that is ‘no more a linguistic constituent of the sentence than a gesture or a winking eye’.

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nary lexical object highlighted in (6a, b) may soon become the regular verb of (6c). The quality of being mentioned may therefore be only weakly present, as a mere signalling of a somewhat uncommon use.

I consider this to be one of the two most relevant insights gained from an often heated (and sometimes scholastic) debate that has been going on for a few decades: that the distinction between use and mention, by being both non-exclusive and gradual, can accommodate a broad variety of quotational phenomena. That this leads us into confusing, grey areas does not invalidate the distinction, as grey does not diminish the status of black and white. It is precisely this fluidity which allows quotation to make a significant contribution to the flexibility of language. That is the second insight: that without quotation language wouldn’t be the extraordinarily versatile communicative device it is.\(^5\)

That may be uncontroversial, but beyond that there is no consensus. Current theories of quotation show a divergence between two fundamentally different perspectives, which can be characterized as semanticist and pragmaticist.\(^6\) It corresponds to the two basic, intimately interrelated aspects of quotation: the relation between signs and metasigns, and use versus mention. While the distinction between sign and metasign is inherently semantic, the use-mention distinction implies a pragmatic dimension. It is speakers who use or mention, who choose whether ‘to talk about the words themselves or their sense’; and it is up to their interpreters to guess their intentions, on the basis of what’s most relevant in the present context.

Semanticists have continued the logicist tradition of Frege, Tarski, and Quine, and have limited their attention to quotation as it is formalized by the use of quotation marks in writing. In this example from Quine, (7a) and (7b) signify different statements. As Quine points out, the second is true, the first is ‘not merely untrue but ungrammatical and meaningless’.\(^7\)

(7a) Dreary rhymes with weary.
(7b) ‘Dreary’ rhymes with ‘weary’.

That is true in a world where orthography is part of syntax,\(^8\) but many readers will be inclined to interpret both as equivalent, with (7a) merely disregarding conventions of writing. Generally, understanding language involves the active and generous cooperation of readers and listeners.

It is the function of quotation marks to show that a sign is transformed into its metasign. A rigorous semanticist approach may deny that a theory of quotation should say anything more than precisely that. This is the gist of Cappelen and Lepore’s Disquotational Theory: it explains quotation as governed by the axiom schema ‘\(e\) quotes \(e\)’

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\(^5\) Cappelen and Lepore (2007: 8, 123).
\(^7\) Quoted after Cappelen and Lepore (2007: 36).
\(^8\) Cappelen and Lepore (2007: 13) in fact call quotation marks ‘syntactic devices’. Often they are considered punctuation, but this is an altogether useless category, in which syntactic (.), prosodic (!?) and other functions (/ [...]/) are thrown together. More appropriately they are considered ancillary signs (Hilfssign) with a special ‘semantopragnatic’ function. See Elke Brendel, Jörg Meibauer and Markus Steinbach, ‘Aspekte einer Theorie des Zitierens’, in id. (2007: 5-25, at 9).
The theory does not purport to answer the question *what it is that we do when we quote*. For Cappelen and Lepore, the meaning of “*e*” simply depends on whatever is the meaning of ‘*e*’; that this may have multiple senses is not to be accounted for by a theory of quotation.

Theories of the semanticist type tend to present the data as if language where something autonomous, something that can ‘do things’, rather than as something humans use to do things with. Characteristic is Donald Davidson’s characterization of quotation as a ‘reflexive twist’, in which language itself is the agent:

In quotation not only does language turn on itself, but it does so word by word and expression by expression … (Davidson 2001: 79)

This is a point of view alien to pragmaticists, who have drawn much of their inspiration from speech act theorists such as J.L. Austin, J. Searle, and (particularly) H.P. Grice. It is speakers who cause language to turn on itself, and they do that in order to enhance its flexibility. Quotation marks are no more than a fairly recent, eighteenth-century graphic convention. To make these graphic signs a defining and constitutive element in quotation has no better justification than giving letters a role in the definition of the word ‘word’.

In practice, quotation marks are often erratically applied, and the use-mention distinction can not be made to depend on them; it has to be inferred from grammatical and contextual clues. Quotation may be unmarked in writing by convention, as when Peter introduces himself by mentioning his name (*Hello, I’m Peter*). Often (as in (2)) the quotation is articulated grammatically. On the other hand, the uniformity of the graphic sign obscures the diversity of its application, and suggests a discreteness of the distinction (quoted or not quoted) which in ordinary language does not exist. Since there are no ‘weak’ quotation marks, any expression quoted in some weaker sense may be either overemphasized by being marked, or left unmarked and therefore be unrecognized.

The most debated pragmatic theory of quotation is the Demonstration Theory, first formulated by psychologists Clark and Gerrig, and more recently revised by François Récanati. The act of mentioning is interpreted as a demonstration, which holds an iconic or depictive relation towards the referent. According to Récanati,

In quotation, what we demonstrate is a piece of verbal behaviour – a way of speaking. We demonstrate it by producing an instance of that behaviour, that is, by speaking in the relevant way. (Récanati 2001: 640)

Accordingly, quoting somebody is on a par with other demonstrations of behaviour, such as showing how to perform a tennis serve, imitating a friend’s limp, or moving like a pendulum.

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12 Clark and Gerrig (1990: 764–805); Récanati (2001). In Davidson’s (semanticist) Demonstrative Theory, quotation marks have a demonstrative function.
13 Examples taken from Clark and Gerrig (1990: 764).
While cases of mention may often be demonstrations, and the object of a demonstration (such as a tennis serve) may often be indiscriminable from the demonstration, it seems doubtful to me that what we quote is an instance of behaviour. Quoting Peter (1), we do not imitate his behaviour. What we replicate are his words (the ‘sign’), not his speech act (unless the quotation is part of an imitative act, such as parody). It is at this more abstract linguistic level that he is quoted. A limp and a tennis serve on the other hand can be demonstrated, but not ‘used’, because they are not signs and elements in discourse. We do not ‘quote’ a limp by demonstrating it, and our demonstration is not a metasign.

What all of these theories, semanticist or pragmaticist, have in common is that they attempt to explain quotation as an instance of some more general phenomenon x. Since Davidson’s influential 1979 essay *Quotation* they been labelled on the pattern of ‘The X-Theory of Quotation’ (X standing for labels such as Proper Name, Picture, Description, Demonstration, Disquotation, and Identity). Their weaknesses are a consequence of the narrowness of such definition: any x theory will fail as soon as some type of quotation cannot be properly analysed as an instance of x.

It is evident that only a pragmatic approach will allow us to consider quotation outside language. We cannot appeal to quotation marks as fulfilling a constitutive function, though, as we will see, marking devices do play a role in musical quotation. What we need in order to transpose the linguistic concept of quotation to music is not an explanation of quotation as a phenomenon x, but a set of conditions that allow us to discuss musical and linguistic phenomena non-metaphorically in the same terms.

**Replication, Reference, and Embedding**

It may seem that the attempt to chart the domain of musical quotation by the guidance of language, rather than in its own terms, is doomed from the outset. Music lacks semantics in the linguistic sense (whatever meaning it may have in a broader sense), and it can produce nothing like direct or indirect speech, nor pure quotation. We can’t *mention* something without the referential function uniquely exercised by words.

This objection can be brushed aside. While it is evidently true that music can’t show up analogues of (1) and (2), it has been shown that the domain of quotation is broader, and that its manifestations are not always so clear-cut. What musical quotation may resemble more closely is the use of block quotes in a text such as this (without the footnotes), or the use of familiar sayings and expressions in conversation. As for the last part of the objection, examples (4) and (5) show that mention does not require that the quoted item itself contributes to lexical semantics. Nor do we need this in order to transform a sign into a metasign; what we need is a context (in whatever medium) that is sufficiently coherent and significant to encapsulate a sign, and make it stand out qua sign. Coherence and significance are discursive qualities that language evidently has, and that music may have, in some of its manifestations.

This notion of discursivity may not be uncontroversial, nor sufficiently clear; but it

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15 ‘... the phenomenology of musical quotation is similar to that of nonreferenced quotation in language.’ Bicknell (2001: 189).
is supported by the long tradition in eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetics which characterizes music as ‘speech’ or ‘a speech’, articulating a flow of expressive elements, ‘thoughts’ or ‘ideas’. A full justification of this notion of music as discourse would require an essay of its own; here I can only give the briefest hint of a plea for this premise.

A first condition, which music evidently satisfies, is that it is usually perceived as human-communicative. So are traffic signs; with the substantial difference, that these are isolated signs that fail to enter into any significant relationship, while music constitutes its meaning by unfolding through time in a coherent way, leading and often frustrating our expectations. It may thereby resemble an address to the listener, or a monologue (also dialogue) intended to be overheard. This does not imply that the listener perceives this discourse as somebody’s (the composer’s, for instance). We are quite used to interpreting human communication as not attributable to any specific author; law books, weather forecasts, and traffic signs belong to human communication, but are entirely impersonal. We often unthinkingly accept that a text itself ‘says’ whatever it says. So does music.

But not all the world’s music is discursive; maybe most is not. Dance music should above all make us dance, not listen to how it ‘speaks’. For music, the ‘reflexive twist’ is inessential. It is an add-on, that may have been borrowed from language in a specific cultural setting. The European (particularly post-renaissance) tradition strongly emphasized the ties between music and grammar, rhetoric and poetry. Even within this tradition, obviously, not all music is equally discursive. A minuet is less likely to have pronounced discursive properties than the first movement of a sonata.

Given this discursive context, three features are minimally required to speak of quotation as an act of mentioning, in music as in language. This is a stipulation, and as such it has to prove its usefulness.

The first feature is replication. Quotation is a deliberate action that involves the re-use of certain words borrowed from another speaker, or more generally from another context. Musical quotation is usually thought of as a replication in those parameters which are primarily identified in the score: pitches and durations, in configurations somewhat vaguely identified as motifs, phrases and themes, although in rare cases a harmonic succession or even a single chord may be quotable (the Tristan chord being the obvious example). A phrase or motif may be abstracted from peripheral factors such as key and instrumentation, as one may abstract a linguistic expression from its graphic or spoken appearance. There is thus nothing in principle which precludes literality, or faithful replication, in musical quotation. More peripheral aspects of a composition may be imitated, but one would presumably hesitate to speak of ‘replication’ of instrumentation, style, etc. Imitation in these peripheral parameters may be intended to allude to some other work or style, and this allusion may enrich the associative context; but allusion must be distinguished from quotation. Obviously, though, a quotation may be used to allude to the broader context of its provenance.

The second is reference. The quotation refers to its source, as, for instance, some-

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16 For Nelson Goodman (as for Davidson), quotation marks have a referential function. Goodman thinks that musical quotation lacks reference, because it lacks quotation marks, even though he admits that other clues (context, emphasis, and pause), ‘sufficiently standardized, might constitute an auditory device for direct quotation.
thing that Peter said, or more vaguely, the speech habits of a certain community, or just to the sign itself, as when Peter would introduce himself by saying: ‘Peter’, mentioning his name. Reference crucially depends on intention recognized. It makes no sense to speak of involuntary quotation – though it frequently occurs that unwittingly one borrows an expression from elsewhere. It evidently also depends upon the listener’s ability to identify the referent, at least in an approximate way.

In language, every word and many expressions (idioms, phraseologisms) are taken from some language’s lexicon, and it is implied in the speaker’s communicative intention that her utterances are recognized as belonging to that language. In that sense they refer to that language as a source. Similarly in music, the patterns that define the tonal system form a somewhat ill-defined lexicon from which elements are freely borrowed. The extent to which compositions in the European post-renaissance (‘tonal’) tradition have been shaped by a repertoire of basic tonal patterns has long been underestimated. A notorious pitfall of the once popular Reminiscenzjagd is the identification of such unspecific, ‘grammatical’ borrowings with specific works.

To distinguish quotation from mere borrowing, even in cases where the borrowing is specific, intentional and referential (as may be the case in the use of a cantus firmus), a third feature must be added, embedding. A quotation is a piece of alien discourse that is embedded in the primary discourse, and thereby may be identified as an alien element. It is this feature that allows the transformation of the sign into its metasign. Mere replication – such as Alice’s re-using Peter’s words in (9b) - is not quotation. It becomes a quotation by being pasted into another argument or report, and recognizably referring to the earlier context, as in (9c). Even if that primary discourse has no extension beyond the quotation – as when Alice marks her quotation by her tone of voice (in 9d). Here the utterance is an imitation of Peter’s behaviour; it is the discrepancy between its meaning and Alice’s communicative intention that marks the words as quotation.

(9a) (Peter:) Bankers are crooks.
(9b) (Alice:) I don’t think all bankers are crooks.
(9c) (Alice:) I don’t think all ‘bankers are crooks’.
(9d) (Alice, sarcastically:) ‘Bankers are crooks.’

As in language, a quotation may be recognized without being marked, or may mark itself, so to speak, by mere familiarity. The first eight notes from Für Elise, a snippet from the Carmen habanera, or an iconic expression of just two or three words (to boldly go) will stand out immediately in almost any context. With sufficient familiarity and frequency, such unmarked quotations may lose their status as quotation and become phraseologisms (between heaven and earth), where reference to the original context is absent or irrelevant.

Each of these three features may be only weakly present, resulting in a gliding scale from strong, paradigmatic cases to vaguely quotational phenomena. It is precisely this circumstance that makes quotation a fascinating, multifaceted phenomenon, and it al-
allows us to approach musical quotation from a different angle than is customary. Traditionally, the study of musical quotation is limited to instances where a fragment from one piece is recognizably used in another piece. In my proposal, those typical instances are included as one end of the spectrum. It is also possible however to observe how a recurring idea, theme or phrase may be both used and mentioned within one composition. This is a more contentious issue, because repetition and recurrence are not only frequent but constitutive elements of music. Evidently, in this respect music strongly differs from most forms of linguistic discourse. One does not say the same thing twice without reason, and a repeat can never be merely the same thing said again.

The point has been made, with considerable exaggeration, by André Grétry in his famous quip about the man “who cuts his speech in two and repeats each half”:

A sonata is a speech (discours). What would we think of a man who cuts his speech in two and repeats each half? “I called upon you this morning; yes, I called upon you this morning, to discuss some business matter; to discuss some business matter”. That, more or less, is the effect which useless musical reprises have upon me. It’s a different matter when a charming phrase or short tune is repeated three or four times; for just as a man may say ten times I love you to his sweetheart, in the same way, I should think, one may repeat an expressive melodic phrase. I’m speaking in particular about those long reprises which make up half a speech. (Grétry 1797: 356-7, my transl.)

But whereas the musical formalist concludes that a sonata is not a speech, Grétry upholds the opposite, and directs his criticism against contemporary compositional practice. The discursive nature of music is his premise. His remark is of interest also as a reminder that some forms of discourse, particularly, affective (as against propositional) speech are more tolerant of repetition than the formalist may concede.

To the extent that music is recognized to have a discursive or quasi-discursive character, its themes, phrases, or ‘ideas’ will be interpreted as statements, or meaningful, communicative acts. And the more a theme has the character of a statement, the less repeatable it is, or the stronger the urge to find meaning when it is repeated. Alternatively, it may lose its assertoric character and fade into the background. The opening four notes of Beethoven’s Fifth constitute an exemplary emphatic statement. Its immediate repetition one tone lower may be heard as a continuation or development of that statement, but it would be absurd to consider the incessant repetitions of that rhythmic motif throughout the movement as something like rhetorical anaphora. What seems to happen, rather, in this and numerous similar cases, is that the material is moved to a different plane, from foreground to background, becoming basic material for a larger scale harmonic-rhythmic process.

Music Mentioned

A few examples may help bridging the gap between linguistic and musical discourse. I will discuss three, illustrating music quoted in speech, in vocal music, and in instrumen-

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19 ‘A musical quotation is a deliberate evocation within a composition of a different musical work.’ Bicknell (2001: 185). ‘[Quotation], as defined here, refers to the placement of parts of a pre-existent piece in a new composition or performance. ... Quotation is also set apart by the prominence of the borrowing, which is made to stick out from the surrounding music.’ Metzer (2003: 4).
tal music.

The fact that linguistic quotation is open to other sign systems has already been shown in relation to musical notation (5). More to the point is the integration of actual music in speech, as in (10), from the famous scene in the movie *Casablanca* where Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) persuades a pretendedly forgetful Sam (Dooley Wilson) to perform *As Time Goes By*.

(10) (Ilsa:) I’ll hum it for you. (Hums two bars.)

Here Ilsa gives a demonstration, but not of behaviour. In order to show ‘how it goes’, Ilsa presents a sample of the song, rather than giving a performance. Writing the notes on a napkin would have served the same function. If Sam were to criticize her humming (‘Sorry, Miss Ilsa, but you’re out of tune’), it would have sounded misplaced. Maybe (10) fails to qualify as an instance of quotation because the humming is not part of the sentence. We may remedy this by changing it into *It goes like ‘...’* or *It begins with ‘...’*, where the music fulfils the syntactic function of a noun.

In similar ways, music may be mentioned in a musical context. The opening solo of Bach’s Cantata 158, for bass singer and basso continuo, is a miniature sermon upon the liturgical salutation, *Der Friede sei mit dir* (*Pax vobiscum*) (Ex. 1). These formulaic opening words are continued in the text as an address to the speaker’s own soul (*Peace be with you, my fearful conscience! Your Mediator has annulled the burden of your debt ...*). The salutation itself is sung as an arioso on a walking bass, the continuation, the sermon, as free recitative. The alternation of arioso and recitative clearly articulates the distinction between contents mentioned and contents used. The recitative constitutes a basic level of discourse, in which the quotations are embedded as an object for contemplation. In this case the music, unlike the text, does not refer to a specific source (such as a chant associated with these words). Bach does use however a cadential formula in a way that emphatically exposes its formulaic nature, with its odd placement at the beginning of the piece. In this way he ‘marks’ the quotation with the help of musical syntax.

Any musical device that highlights a passage as in some way standing apart from the main discourse may under certain circumstances serve as musical quotation marks: a disruption of the flow by contrasting metre and rhythm, texture, dynamics, a discontinuity in harmonic syntax, or harmonic stasis. The use of contrast as a musical marking device is not an eighteenth century novelty; nor is it particularly subtle. Such contrasts have been used for refrains in vocal music at least since the fourteenth century *ars nova*, and those refrains often involve textual and sometimes musical quotations. As common in popular and folk music, refrains do not usually contain quoted material from elsewhere, but they do present quotable content. Embedded in an ongoing discourse through repetition, and often highlighted by shared (‘sing-along’) performance they acquire something like a proverbial character.


When a musical idea recurs in a different context, rather than being immediately repeated, it is possible that the circumstances of its recurrence make it appear as a reference to or reflection upon its earlier occurrence. When this happens, a third dimension is opened up in musical discourse, beyond the simultaneous and the successive: in various ways music may ‘turn on itself’, to use Davidson’s expression.

An example is the last statement of the main theme in the coda of Mozart’s G minor Symphony K550 (Ex. 2). It enters not on the tonic, as in the original statement, but
on the dominant, a harmonically unstable moment which resolves by a little cadential
detour. The theme is, as it were, projected onto a fractured surface: it falls apart into
several canonic echoes, subjected to a fleeting harmonic progression on top of a punc-
tuated tonic pedal. The closing formula, with its sudden *forte*, inverts the rhythm of the
theme (\(\begin{array}{c}
\frac{7}{4} \rightarrow \frac{3}{4} \rightarrow \frac{7}{4} \\
\frac{3}{4} \rightarrow \frac{7}{4} \rightarrow \frac{3}{4}
\end{array}\)), almost as a contradiction, and repeats it mechanically, terminating
rather than concluding the movement. In its placement as a post facto event, this ap-
appearance of the theme is backward looking. It is a reminder of the theme rather than a
direct statement, and as such, the theme is mentioned rather than used.

In this example we may observe a subtle use of what is in fact a common, almost
trivial device, that might be described as a theme-reminder on a final tonic pedal. The
pedal point here functions as an embedding device; and it is the much familiar device to
fulfil that function. Its most striking manifestation is the concerto cadenza, which has
developed from a mere ornament on a suspension before the penultimate chord into an
elaborate free fantasia. Everything that happens during this postponement of the final
resolution is a parenthetical digression within the main discourse. Lacking their proper
harmonic-syntactic root, themes that recur in this setting tend to lose whatever their as-
sertoric character they may have; they become signs of themselves.

Ex. 2. W.A. Mozart: Symphony in G minor K550/1.
Metasigns, Semantics, and Grammaticalization

These observations should make it plausible, in an introductory way, that in music (as in language) a fluid distinction applies between contents used and mentioned. It supports the general contention that despite their being very different, and in many ways incommensurable sign systems, music and language yet have significant features in common. Some features that are essential to language may be incidental to music, and become relevant only in a certain cultural tradition. The autoreflexivity of quotation seems to be an essential feature of language, that can be adopted by music of a certain complexity. Just as it is often possible to ignore quotation in a verbal text (at the price of a reduced understanding, but not always complete misunderstanding), so it is possible to ignore this ‘third dimension’ of music, of musical ideas referring to themselves, as well as to other ideas and discourses, and to reduce it to a linear flow of empty syntax. It’s just a poorer way of listening.

Given its remarkable syntactic, lexical and semantic features, it is surprising that quotation has been so widely ignored in general linguistic theory. Even in the philosophical debate, it is often assumed that this metalinguistic feature is paralinguistic, something that lies outside the domain of language itself. It is more likely that meta-representation, or the ability to transform signs into more complex metasigns, plays an essential role in the formation of the lexicon, and as a specifically human ability may provide an important cognitive clue as to how human language has evolved from a more primitive form of communication.

An essential difference between language and animal systems is the generalization of a sign beyond an immediate context of action. A word is not a signal, but a mentionable sign that can be freely used in any context. It is our ability to think of words as words and what they mean that allows us to detach these signs from an immediate action context. Simply put, the ability to speak of fire without causing alarm involves the ability to reflect upon that sign (‘fire’) – to mention it – without thinking there is a fire (fire!). The plain signal, or fire alarm, has no reference (it does not denote fire), but is bound to conditions of use and action (scream when there is a fire, and run with the others). As long as it works as a signal, in the appropriate situation and associated with appropriate action, it is not reflected upon as a sign. But used outside this action context (when there is no fire – as a bad joke maybe?) it will conjure the idea of fire in its absence. The false signal is not ‘used’; it fails as a signal. However, by that very fact it is brought to attention (‘mentioned’) as what it is, a signal. Dissociated from its context of action, the signal may become a symbol for fires in general. It is then no longer mentioned, but used as a symbol with a highly generalized reference, a word that accumulates meaning by association with other words.

This is a speculative hypothesis about a stage in the formation of language. Its

23 For a combination of linguistic and philosophical perspectives, see Brendel, Meibauer and Steinbach (2007 and 2011).
plausibility derives from the fact that it is an extrapolation from a process that we can see in action every day. Grammaticalization is a development ‘from lexical to grammatical forms, and from grammatical to even more grammatical forms’, or as Wilhelm von Humboldt put it, from \textit{Sachbedeutung} to \textit{Formbedeutung}.\footnote{Heine and Kuteva (2007: 32).} Words routinely lose their referential quality and become features of syntax, which are meaningful only through their relations with other words. In this way, the noun \textit{cause} has become assimilated in the conjunction \textit{because} (\textit{by cause of/that}). An adjective may be derived from a sound imitation (‘that squeaky oboe’). An individual’s proper name (‘Bach’) may become an adjective referring to features of his work or style (‘a Bach recitative’; ‘this is so \textit{Bach}’; ‘a somewhat Bachish aria’).

Grammaticalization is a process in one direction, from lexical reference (outward) towards syntactic function (inward). Quotation may act as a counterpart by pushing towards stronger referentiality. The ordinary word ‘crook’ acquires a narrow denotational focus when it us used to refer to Peter’s use of that word in one specific utterance. The conjunction \textit{because} may be transformed into a noun, which as a metasign is understood through its reference to its conjunction original (11).

\begin{equation}
\text{11) Our ‘whys’ and our ‘becauses’ are obliged to stop.\textsuperscript{28}}
\end{equation}

The processes of grammaticalization (through use) and its contrary (through mention) may on a miniature time scale be observed in a musical composition. A musical phrase may be exposed as a quotable statement, then fade into the background as a mere figure, and emerge again as a reminder of itself. If the understanding we apply to such musical processes shares cognitive resources with linguistic understanding, the study of music may contribute to that of language, as well as being rewarding in itself.\footnote{On the increasing neurological evidence of brain functions shared by music and language, see e.g. Patel (2008) and Kunert et al. (2015).}

References