

# **Jamming In A Semiotic Scope. Spontaneous Musical Communication as Language**

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## **Introduction**

Spontaneous musical communication between musicians has been looked upon from different perspectives during the recent years. In this article the spontaneous communication as performed by funk musicians is analysed through the lense of semiotics, as signs, using the theoretical works of Jacobson, Peirce, Saussure and Barthes based on the author's experience as a jamming musician. Jam is this sense being a musical activity where the musicians beforehand have no conceptual rules, songs or arrangements but are forced to rely only on the communication with the other musicians in 'the spur of the moment' – and then mix, put together, jam musical whole based on only musical statements.

The article raises and discusses the question: 'Does musical communication regarded as a semiotic system of signs provide a more profound understanding of the musicians' spontaneous actions during a jam session?'

## **'Langue' and 'parole'**

Barthes reflects on the relations between linguistics and semiology and states that: [semiology] is that part [of linguistics] covering the great unities of discourse. (...) to bring to light the unity of the research at present being done in anthropology, sociology, (...) and stylistics round the concept of signification (Barthes, 1968: 11).

In Saussure's linguistic work to understand and classify '*the multiform and heterogeneous nature of language*' the dichotomy of *language* [*langue*] and *speech* [*parole*] is essential in order to extract '*a purely social object, the systematized set of conventions necessary to communication*' (Barthes, 1968: 13)

In Saussure's definition *langue* is a social institution and a system of values whereas *parole* is the individual act of selection and actualization (Barthes, 1963:15). The two concepts exist only in a close dialectic relation. No *langue* without *parole* and vice

versa. Merleau-Ponty states that this exchange constitutes the real linguistic praxis and Brøndal states that [langue] '*is a purely abstract entity, a norm which stands above individuals, a set of essential types which [parole] actualizes in an infinite variety of ways*' (Brøndal, 1937)

*Parole* evolve *Langue* in a dialectic process: Historically *parole* phenomena always precede *langue* phenomena making [langue] '*at the same time the product and the instrument of [parole]*' (Barthes, 1968: 16).

### **Between *langue* and *parole***

In discussing the individual /privat (*parole*) contributions to the common language (*langue*) the term *idiolect* was by some semiologists defined as '*the language (...) as it is spoken by a single individual* (Martinet) and '*the whole set of habits of a single individual at a given moment*' (Ebeling). Jakobson questions whether this concept is of scientific meaning. He states that there is no such thing as a purely individual [*langue*] and claims that '*private property in the sphere of language does not exist*' and also '*one tries more or less to speak the other's language*' (Jakobson, 1963).

Many of the semiologic and linguistic researchers in the 1960'es thus agree upon the need for a concept describing the space between *parole* and *langue* where *parole* is institutionalised but not yet '*radically open to formalization*' (Barthes, 1968: 21) and generally to nuance the understanding of semiologic phenomena.

Sociologist Durkheim on the other hand stresses the sociological scope of the *langue/parole* concept and talks about a *collective consciousness* (????).

### **The shared space, the common discourse**

*"meaning cannot be transmitted from one to the other, but is constructed between the speaker and the listener, the writer and the reader"*  
(Dyste, 1999).

A successful spontaneous musical communication cannot be entirely based on specific common knowledge, common repertoire, common discourse or even common cultural background. On the contrary: Acknowledging differences and diversity, the unexpected, the 'never before heard' puts the musician in the state of mind where metacommunicative competences are required. Musical communication is then not a matter of either *langue* as a common ground or an individual *parole* but is situated in

the space between where the communication seems to be constructing still new complex systems of musical signs.

In research on computer mediated communication Riva states that the individuals must "*render explicit the elements that enable them to understand each other and act together*" (Riva, 2002).

Kraut & Streeter describe the common space as "*the shared construction of meanings*" (1995), where the meaningful is neither A's or B's reality but the new common reality and constructed context, a '*shared space*' (*ibid.*).

It seems meaningful to regard the communication in the jam context with these concepts. To look at on one hand the community of musicians holding a larger or smaller amount of *langue*, common language, common discourse and on the other hand the single musician's personally expressed *paroles* offers an understanding of the common versus the individual musical means of communication. And the *common space* between seems to provide an understanding of an essentially unpredictable and spontaneously constructed discourse in the jam context.

### **Jakobson's model of the functions of language**

Russian-American linguist Roman Jakobson introduced in 1960 his model of the functions of language and this research will examine the potential for applying this model on the spontaneous communication in the jamming band.

Fig.1. Jakobson's model of *the functions of language*

Function-#	Target factor	Source factor	Function name	Jakobson's examples	Alt. function names
1	Context	Message	Referential	Water boils at 100 °C	<i>Denotative cognitive representative informative</i>
2	Adresser	Message	Emotive	Oh!	<i>Expressive</i>
3	Adressee	Message	Conative	Go away!	<i>Appellative directive imperative</i>
4	Contact	Message	Phatic	Hello?	<i>Relational</i>
5	Code	Message	Metalingual	'a definition', a code	<i>Metasemiotic</i>
6	Message	Message	Poetic	Smurf	<i>Esthetic rhetorical</i>

(Hébert, L. (2006): *The Functions of Language*. [www.Signosemio.com](http://www.Signosemio.com)

According to Jakobson each factor is necessary to communication but not always present and with very different hierarchical positions. Jakobson states fx that in regards to poetry that not only is the poetic function dominant. Epic poetry (written in 3rd person) '*strongly involves the referential function of the language*' (Jakobson, 1960: 357).

Klinkenberg discusses how relations between functions can be developed in a non-hierachical manner and asks whether it is possible to '*actually distinct one [function] from another*' (In Hébert, 2006a). When fx pairing the referential and the conative function it seems obvious that any referential statement – any information – will have an impact on the receiver's knowledge. It acts on the receiver (the conative function). And looking at fx the cry for help the primary function will be the emotive (expressive) although it holds a significant phatic (relational) function as well. (Klinkenberg, In Hébert, 2006a).

### **Jakobson's model applied on spontaneous musical communication**

Regarding the musician's spontaneous musical communication in the jamming band in the scope of Jakobson's model gives a nuanced picture of the communication at large: Generally two ways of analysis could be performed: 1) A hierachical analysis of the six functions' relevance for the message and 2) a dualistic, comparative analysis, where functions are paired and regarded as interactional.

The actual form of the musical message could be a musician playing a short funky guitar rhythm on a G7 chord.

A hierachical analysis could lead to these analytic conclusions:

1. The *referential* function is very limited. Jakobson asks: Is it true or not? to verify the referential function of a message. This test would not meaningfully apply to a musical statement. The addressees could ask themselves if it truly is a G7, but would not know whether the chord played was **intended** to sound the way it does.
2. The *emotive* function is very dominant. The message clearly holds the addresser's expressive intentionality. The message expresses something the addresser wants to say.
3. The *conative* function is limited. The messsage holds very little appellative and directive information. The message does not say Play this! or Do this!

The message can be perceived in an infinite number of ways by the addressee(s).

4. The *phatic* function is very dominant. The addresser's intention with the message is relational. Is somebody there? Does someone want to jam?
5. The *metalingual* function is also dominant. To fully enhance the presence of this function is it however necessary to consider whether the Durkheimian *collective consciousness* plays a role. It would be in the valuation of the metalingual function that the cultural phenomena of musicians coming from different musical cultures would have its largest impact. If the musicians have very different perceptions of the *langue* in a Saussurian sense the metalingual function will be inferior and vice versa. Rastier's notion about *dialect* (the language system) and *sociolect* (dialect in specific social praxes with its own discourse organized through genres) (Rastier, 1968; Perron & Rastier, 1997) could also be useful to enhance these nuances in the metalingual function.
6. The *poetic* function will be dominant *per se*. Generally every musical statement holds a dominant *poetic* function in the sense that the message can be regarded purely as a message for itself.

## Conclusions

In a semiotic perspective the spontaneous musical communication can be understood and valued using Saussure's concepts of the individual *parole* and the common *langue* supplemented by Kraut & Streeter's concept of *common space* to describe the dynamic discourse of the jamming musicians.

Jakobson's functions of the language put attention to the musical statements and their relations to the different communicational factors during the processes of the jam session. The functional analysis seems to offer a deeper understanding of the qualities of the spontaneous musical communication. Further research would have to be conducted in order to unfold the potentials of this perspective in regard to teaching spontaneous communicational skills.

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