

Jazz as Musical Conversation: How do Jazz Musicians Communicate with Each Other?

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Aim and Objectives

Musicians and scholars describe the process of jazz improvisation as having a conversation with a good friend (Broom, 2005; Monson 1996, 74). The collaborative, interactive, and unexpected properties of conversation in language correspond with the properties of communication among jazz musicians. The aim of the present paper is to acknowledge and expand this metaphor of conversation and to provide a systematic framework with which to explain and understand underlying principles and mechanisms in the highly elusive area of jazz improvisation.

Context

Similar to a spoken conversation, jazz improvisation embodies the processes of collaborative creativity, unexpectedness, and underlying assumptions. In *Thinking in Jazz*, Paul Berliner discusses the variability associated with jazz improvisation and recognizes that any member of the group can move the music in another direction (Berliner 1994, 374). Ingrid Monson suggests that the musician who lacks the ability to “pick up on things” creates a block in the musical conversation, resulting in disappointment or frustration. Professional jazz musicians create rewarding moments by doing *something*, responding, to each other (Monson 1996, 94-95).

Several psychologists, philosophers, and linguists stress the collaborative nature of language use (Sawyer, 2001; Clark, 1991; Grice, 1975). Much of this work stems from the proposals of H. Paul Grice, an influential philosopher of language. Grice’s theories of meaning (1957) and cooperation in communication (1975) provide a framework on which many others such as Austin, Searle, and Clark have built. Fundamental to the topic at hand are Grice’s maxims and cooperative rules for implicit language communication. Grice’s cooperative framework includes four maxims that are evident in conversation: quantity (make your contribution informative), quality (make your contribution truthful), manner (avoid ambiguity and disorderliness), and relation (make your contribution relevant) (Grice, 1975). Cooperative music-making is governed by some of the same principles (Ashley, 2005). In jazz, Berliner describes the importance of playing sincerely and informatively, stating that jazz has “high performance standards” (Berliner 1994, 53). This standard reflects the importance of quantity

and quality in jazz improvisation.

Later scholars, including Herbert Clark (1981, 1996) attempt to describe the way in which conversations are structured as joint actions. Many aspects of conversation involve a speaker's presentation followed by listener uptake, which may include agreement, negation, paraphrase, information request, or clarification. Depending on the response, the conversation may be directed to new territory or presented information may be expanded upon (Clark, 1996). We predict that these principles of collaboration and pragmatics play a significant role in the implicit and subtle communication in jazz improvisation.

Methodology

The project involved a video-taping and post-performance interview of a well-known jazz trio in Chicago. The trio consists of a guitarist, bassist, and drummer, and all musicians are professional musicians with over 20 years of experience. The video-taping took place in a venue where the trio plays weekly for a period of three hours, and the interview took place in a quiet room at the performance venue with all three musicians present.

The video was evaluated for places of significant and salient interaction. We chose a portion of the bassist's solo (48 measures) from a popular standard, *All the Things You Are* (Hammerstein & Kern), with an AABA form.

Results

Two rhythmic interactions and one pitch-related interaction are depicted in figure 1. The places of interaction include uptake and agreement in form of repetition (A), information request (B), and paraphrase (C). The bassist begins his solo with a paradigmatic bass statement, fitting the context of the tune, which corresponds to the notion of Grice's maxims of quality and relation. In mm. 8-9, the drummer repeats the statement presented in mm.6-7 by the bassist, which indicates a conversational uptake and repetition. The analogue in language would be a repetition of a phrase to indicate proper understanding. In mm.29-30, the bassist plays softer and simpler, allowing for the other musicians to contribute in a contrasting way; similar to asking for more information in a conversation. A paraphrase is illustrated in m.48, where the guitarist rephrases the basic concept of descending chromaticism first presented by the bassist in m.47.

According to the interview, these musicians are able to present statements and respond with adequate sensitivity due to the fact that they all have a mutual understanding of the jazz language and of the "aesthetic" associated with each musician (Broom et al., 2005). Herbert Clark labels this concept of collective understanding and coordination of process in language as *grounding* (Clark, 1996). The bassist's statement about "knowing his aesthetic" indicates his understanding, or

process of grounding with the other members of the group. This knowledge frees the musicians and allows for relevant elaboration or acknowledgement. During the interview, the musicians also commented on presenting musical statements with good “feeling”, which relates to the maxim of quality. The “offending the mood” comment stated by the drummer echoes the maxim of relation and signifies the importance of context. The comment about “playing real busy” stated by the bassist echoes the maxim of manner (Broom et al., 2005). Thus, the process of jazz improvisation, similar to Grice’s principles in language, depends significantly on maxims, context, and background knowledge.

Figure 1

The figure displays two musical staves, A and B, with annotations. Staff A is labeled 'Bass' and shows a bass line with a treble clef and a 6/8 time signature. It features two boxed sections of music. A red arrow points from the end of the first box to the start of the second box. Staff B is labeled 'Guitar' and 'Bass' and shows a guitar line with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature, and a bass line with a bass clef and a 4/4 time signature. The guitar line has a 'SVA' annotation and a 'PART REPEATED NOTES' annotation. A red arrow points from the end of the guitar line to the start of the bass line. Both staves have various musical notations, including notes, rests, and accidentals.

C

The image shows a musical score for Guitar and Bass. The score is divided into two systems. The first system shows the Bass line with a triplet of eighth notes (Bb, Ab, Gb) and a quarter note (Fb). The second system shows the Guitar line with a melodic line starting on Bb, moving to Ab, Gb, Fb, and then a quarter note on E. A red arrow points from the end of the Bass line in the first system to the beginning of the Guitar line in the second system.

Key Contribution

For these particular examples, the exemplary models of pragmatics and grounding helps to explain the complex and variable features of jazz improvisation. The detailed mechanisms underlying conversation in jazz improvisation studied here may provide a framework with which to guide future research.

Key Words

Jazz improvisation, Conversation, Expectation, Maxims

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