X-bar Theory in 17th-18th Century Western Tonal Music

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1. Objective: It has been proposed that musical syntax and universals can be examined using linguistic tools and concepts (Bernstein 1976). The goal of my presentation is to support the claim that “music contains a syntactic component in which headed structures are built” (Katz and Pesetsky, 2011). I do this by showing that the structure of cadences in 17th-18th c. Western tonal music obeys principles of X-bar theory.

2. Experiment: I carried out an experiment to answer the following question. Can we identify heads, and distinguish between complement and adjunct modifiers in the syntax of cadences, in terms of obligatoriness/optionality, variability and order? First I played a few pairs of harmonic (following the style of music investigated) and disharmonic cadences to forty musically untrained participants to illustrate the task. Then they heard thirty audio files, well-formed and ill-formed cadences. The task was to judge the melodies on a 5-point Likert scale if they were harmonic (pleasant to hear).

3. Results: The statistical analysis of the results largely confirms my hypothesis that the structure of cadences is analogous to X-bar theoretic phrase structure. The experiment raised additional questions that require further research.

References


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