

Merge and movement in language and music

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In an influential paper, Katz & Pesetsky (2011) present the identity thesis for language and music, stating that “[a]ll formal differences between language and music are a consequence of differences in their fundamental building blocks (arbitrary pairings of sound and meaning in the case of language; pitch classes and pitch-class combinations in the case of music). In all other respects, language and music are identical.” Katz & Pesetsky argue that, just like syntactic structures, musical structures are generated by (binary) Merge, for which they provide a number of arguments: For instance, musical structures are endocentric (each instance of Merge in music, just like in language, has a labelling head). They also argue that movement phenomena (i.e., the application of Rmerge) can be attested in both language and music. While fully endorsing the view that musical structures are the result of multiple applications of External (binary) Merge, this paper argues that the arguments in favour of the presence of Rmerge in music are at best inconclusive and arguably incorrect. This is, however, not taken as an argument against the identity thesis for language and music; rather, I take it to follow from it: The identity thesis for language and music reduces all differences between language and music to its basic building blocks. If the application of Internal Merge in natural language is driven by syntactic features (cf. Chomsky 1995; 2002; Boskovic 2007; Zeijlstra 2012) that are language-specific and not applicable to music (the reason being that only building blocks that are pairings of sound and meaning can be made up of syntactic features), the direct consequence is that Rmerge cannot be triggered in music either.