

# Meaning construction in verbomusical environments: Conceptual disintegration and metonymy

Paula Pérez-Sobrino\*

*Department of Modern Languages, University of La Rioja (Logroño, Spain), c/ San José de Calasanz 33, 26004 Logroño, La Rioja, Spain*

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## Abstract

In this paper I explore the workings of meaning (re)construction strategies in programmatic musical works, where the music stands for a broader extra-musical narration. The analysis of ten fragments of classical and contemporary music involving text and music reveals that conceptual disintegration in connection to metonymy emerges as a crucial tool for meaning (re)construction in programmatic music. This research presents four major contributions to the field. First, this paper holds for the complementarity of networks of conceptual disintegration and metonymic mappings in order to convincingly account for conceptual disintegration as a product (i.e., the multimodal expression) and as a process (i.e., the conceptual operation). Second, concerning the product, this paper provides a theoretical categorization of conceptual disintegration in terms of the “degree of disintegration” and “degree of subsidiarity” between the represented part and the whole conceptual package. Third, concerning the process, this work claims that metonymy arises as powerful analytical tool because it counts on a higher degree of constraint than blends. A view from Conceptual Metonymy Theory allows us to expand the inventory of possible meaning reconstruction processes in multimodal use: metonymic echoing, metaphonymy, metonymic cueing, source-in-target metonymies and multiple source-in-target metonymies. Fourth, this paper deals with musical and verbomusical examples, largely unexplored in cognitive-linguistic studies.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims at delving deeper into the different levels of multimodal meaning rendered in verbo-musical environments. More specifically, it focuses on a particular strategy of musical meaning (re)construction,<sup>1</sup> i.e., the way in which different patterns of conceptual disintegration that structure the multimodal expression trigger the activation of metonymic reasoning at the conceptual level, in ten examples of program classical and contemporary music involving music and text. Program or programmatic music refers to a type of art music that attempts to render an extra-musical narrative. While the vast majority of music scholars readily acknowledge the existence of programmatic

\* Tel.: +34 941 299416; fax: +34 941 299419.

E-mail addresses: [paula.perez@unirioja.es](mailto:paula.perez@unirioja.es), [paula.perez.sobrino@gmail.com](mailto:paula.perez.sobrino@gmail.com).

<sup>1</sup> The term “meaning (re) construction” is preferred in this paper over “meaning construction” because it refers to both the production and interpretation of meaning.

pieces, the idea of reconstructing a composer's intention *per se* is actually somewhat controversial<sup>2</sup> (cf.; Barthes, 1965; Bloom, 1973; Wimsatt, 1954). The interpretation of the message that program music aims to convey is always dependent on the inferential capabilities of the speakers to a higher or lower extent. In this paper, we contend that this process of meaning reconstruction is aided by the combined workings of conceptual disintegration and metonymy. As shall be argued, these theoretical constructs guide and constrain the meaning reconstruction process, so that the inferential load is largely reduced, the cognitive cost lessened, and the intended message more straightforwardly recovered.

In this paper, conceptual disintegration relates to a selective projection of a multimodal manifestation, whereas metonymy refers to the cognitive process based on granting access from a subdomain (in this case, the partially represented multimodal representation) to a larger and more-encompassing matrix domain. Disintegration and metonymy emerge as crucial tools for meaning (re)construction in programmatic musical works, where the music evokes a broader extra-musical narration.

*Disintegration* as a tool for meaning (re)construction has not received very much scholar attention. Although Fauconnier and Turner (2002:119) have acknowledged its concomitancy to conceptual integration,<sup>3</sup> nothing has been published in this regard since Hougaard's (2005) and Bache (2005) interesting insights in *Journal of Pragmatics*. Framed within Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT; Fauconnier and Turner, 2002), Hougaard (2002:3) defines *disintegration* as "a process by which one unified and discrete structural element in mental space gets to receive multiple counterpart relations and is projected to (an)other mental space(s) as two, or more, separate structural elements". Notwithstanding the attention that CBT has drawn to the issue of conceptual disintegration, the paradigm cannot sufficiently account for the whole phenomenon of meaning (re)construction. Among other shortages (for a critical review of CBT, see Gibbs, 2000; Ritchie, 2004; Ruiz de Mendoza, 1998), the conceptual blend cannot provide us with a convincing separation between *disintegration* as a *product* (the linguistic or multimodal expression) and as a *process* (i.e., the conceptual operation). As Gibbs emphasizes (2000:531), "the processes of linguistic understanding are different from the products we consciously think about when we read or hear verbal expressions" (let "linguistic" and "verbal" stand for "multimodal" for the purposes of this paper). In order to comply with this theoretical distinction, this research delves deeper into the nature and scope of conceptual disintegration and offers an analysis that differs from that of Hougaard (2005) and Bache (2005) in at least four ways.

First, it holds for the complementariness of networks of conceptual disintegration and metonymic mappings in order to convincingly account for disintegration as a *product* (the linguistic or multimodal expression) and as a *process* (i.e., the conceptual operation). Meaning (re)construction is here understood as a two-step process: the first involves the configuration of certain cues to structure the multimodal manifestation (*product*), and the second relates to the cognitive operations triggered at the conceptual level by those multimodal cues (*process*).

Second, as regards the partial representation of a multimodal expression, or *product*, this paper provides a theoretical categorization in terms of the "degree of disintegration" (which yields a distinction between *substitution* and *fragmentation*) and "kind of subsidiarity" between the represented part and the whole conceptual package (on the basis of *inherent dependency* or *ad hoc dependency*). This two-variable taxonomy, here labeled as the Multimodal Conceptual Integration Model (MCIM, Pérez-Sobrino, 2014), goes a step further than CBT in offering at least two criteria to distinguish different types of disintegrated conceptual networks and the principles motivating them.

Third, concerning disintegration as a *process*, this work claims that metonymy arises as a powerful analytical tool in connection to conceptual disintegration because it counts on a higher degree of constraint than blends and it features a greater interactional dimension. As will be shown, the patterns of interaction between metonymies propounded in Ruiz de Mendoza (2000), i.e., *metonymic expansion* and *metonymic reduction*, can account in finer grain for all the inferential activity arising from Hougaard's (2005) conceptual disintegration processes, i.e., *splitting* and *partitioning selection*. Furthermore, a view from Conceptual Metonymy Theory (henceforth, CMYT) allows us to expand the inventory of possible meaning reconstruction processes: evidence is shown to prove the productive working of multimodal *metonymic echoing*, multimodal *metaphonymy*, multimodal *metonymic cueing*, multimodal *source-in-target metonymy* and multimodal

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Mailman (2012) shows tight connections between the intention of the composer and the program structuring the music (e.g., the prelude to Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, where the inevitable flowing of a river is depicted as a gradual increase in pitch range, rate of repetition, number of ostinato layers, orchestral thickness, and proportion of upward motion; Mailman, 2012: chapter 6) and equally meaningful correspondences between a program and a musical work that was not meant to refer to any extra-musical reality (as it is the case of Lucier's *Crossings*, a minimalistic piece which unpurposefully yet readily "evokes the revving of an airplane engine, ominous sirens or a nuclear explosion in slow motion"; Mailman, 2012: chapter 6). Mailman (2009) thus argues in favor of the feasibility of a strong coordination between the musical work and the structuring program, while also stressing the legitimate role of discourse in creating meaning out of the musical work, given that "what seems more narrative in kind depends a lot on convention and context" (Mailman, 2009:406).

<sup>3</sup> In words of Fauconnier and Turner (2002:119), "integration and compression are one side of the coin; disintegration and decompression are the other".

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