

Shaping the Formless: Phrase Structures in Metal Music with Unpitched Vocals

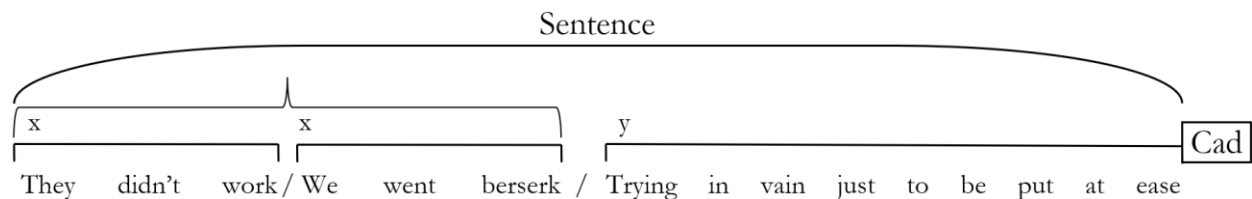
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Abstract

Due in large part to the frequent lack of melodic-harmonic correspondence and unique harmonic syntax of popular music, scholars have engaged phrase structures differently from those in classical music (e.g., Everett 1999, Attas 2011, Robins 2017). A number of these methodologies favor melodic material over harmonic material. For music without pitch-based melodies, even more specialized work has been undertaken in the realm of hip-hop studies (e.g., Adams 2020, Duinker 2021). Still untapped, however, is the repertoire of metal music, which features unpitched “melodies” of a different nature in the form of screams, growls, and shrieks (“harsh vocals”) that require unique treatment. In this paper, I demonstrate how riffs and non-pitch factors like rhythm, timbre, metric placement, and lyrics shape phrases in metal music. In so doing, I engage the repertoire on its own terms, a critical goal of contemporary music theory.

Musical Examples

Example 1: Cattle Decapitation, “Solastalgia,” 2:19, score and phrase diagram



Example 2: Immortal, "Sons of Northern Darkness," 4:19, score and phrase diagram

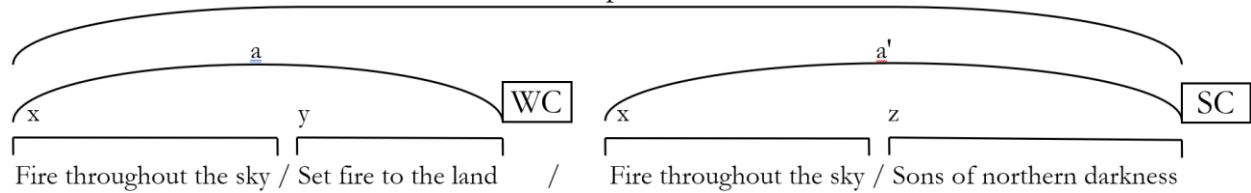
Vocals
Fi - re through - out the sky Set fi - re to the land

Electric Guitars

Vox.
Fi - re through - out the sky Sons of nor - thern dark - ness

E.Gtrs.

Parallel period



Example 3: Cannibal Corpse, "Kill or Become," 1:55, score and phrase diagram

Vocals
Fi - re up the chain - saw

E.Gtrs./
E.Bass

Vox.
Hack all their heads off
Fi - re up the chain - saw

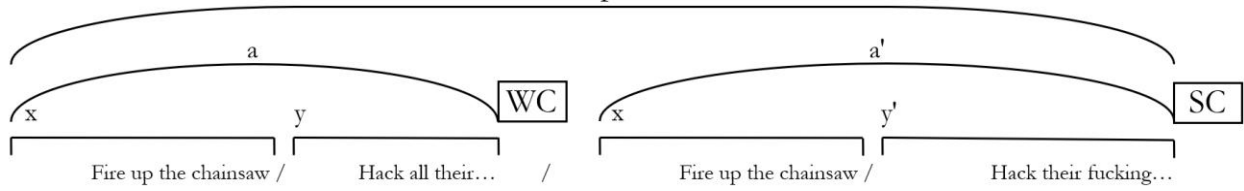
E.G./
E.B.

Vox.
Hack their fuck - ing heads off

E.G./
E.B.

[Diagram on next page]

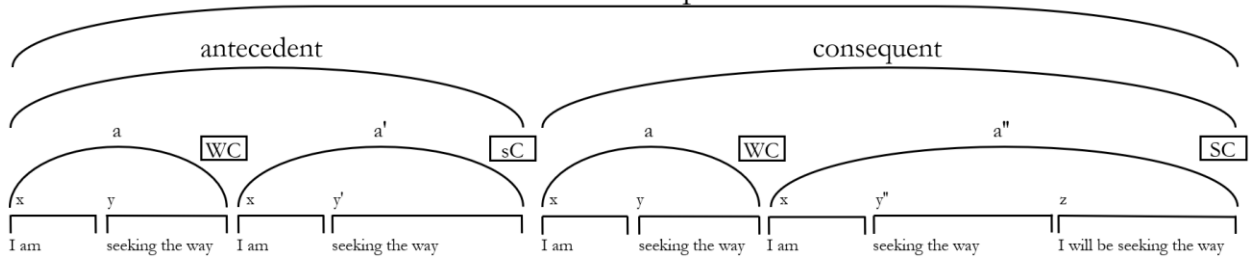
Parallel period



Example 4: Shadows Fall, "Thoughts Without Words," 3:40, score and phrase diagram

Example 4: Shadows Fall, "Thoughts Without Words," 3:40, score and phrase diagram. The diagram shows five vocal lines with lyrics and phrase diagrams. The lines are labeled "Vocals", "Vox.", "Vox.", "Vox.", and "Vox.". The lyrics include "I am seeking the way", "Echo (seek-ing) the way (the way, the way, the way)", and "I will be seeking the way". The diagrams use various vowel and consonant labels like 'a', 'a'', 'a'''', 'x', 'y', 'y''', and 'z'.

Parallel double period



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