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RECYCLING OF GENERAL ENGLISH VOCABULARY INTO SPECIALIZED MUSIC-THEORETICAL TERMS - MAJOR DIATONIC SCALE

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Abstract:
English has gradually emerged as the principal language of international musicological discourse and pedagogy. Within this linguistic shift, a large proportion of technical music-theoretical vocabulary is derived not from foreign languages but from general English words that have been re-semanticized for musical use. This paper examines how familiar English terms—such as “scale,” “step,” “key,” “sign,” “tone,” “degree,” and “natural”—are repurposed as technical labels for the Major Diatonic Scale in theory and classroom practice. By analyzing textbook definitions, lesson-plan language, and common pedagogical formulations, the study argues that these lexical borrowings function as a cognitive framework that shapes how students conceptualize tonal structure. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications of this lexical economy for multilingual music-theory instruction and for the global transmission of Western tonal ideology through English.

Keywords: Musicology, English as a lingua franca, Major Diatonic Scale, lexical borrowing, music terminology, general English vocabulary, English-medium pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Musicology today operates largely in English, and a significant portion of its technical vocabulary is drawn from general English words rather than from foreign languages such as Italian, German, or Latin. [3][8] Many of the core terms used to describe the Major Diatonic Scale words like "scale,” “step,” “key,” “sign,” “tone,” “degree,” and “natural” are ordinary English lexemes that have acquired very specific, bounded meanings within music theory. [1][2]

This paper focuses on the general-English vocabulary that has been converted into music-theoretical terminology for the Major Diatonic Scale. Instead of treating these terms as self-evident labels, the discussion analyzes how their semantic shift from everyday usage to technical usage shapes perception, memory, and pedagogy. By foregrounding this lexical layer, the paper brings into view how English not only names the Major Diatonic Scale but also constructs the cognitive framework in which it is understood and taught.

2. FROM GENERAL ENGLISH TO MUSIC-THEORETICAL LEXICON

2.1. The lexical “loaning” of everyday words

In English-language music theory, several general-purpose English words are pressed into technical service with only minor morphological change:

- “Step” → half step, whole step
- “Key” → key, key signature
- “Sign” → sharp sign (#), flat sign (♭)
- “Tone” → whole tone, semitone, major/minor third [2][4]

These words continue to be spelled and pronounced as in everyday English, which creates a lexical illusion: students may assume they already know the meanings, only to discover that the technical definitions are much more precise and context-bound. [5][10] This lexical smoothness makes English particularly effective as a vehicular language for music theory, but it also obscures the extent to which general English is being re-coded as a specialized technical register.

2.2. "Major" and "diatonic" as naturalized technical terms

Two of the most salient lexical borrowings related to the Major Diatonic Scale are "major" and "diatonic":
- In everyday English, "major" commonly means "large," "important," or "significant."
- In music theory, "major" is a technical quality attached to intervals, chords, and scales that denotes a specific size or structure (e.g., major third, major triad, major scale/Major Diatonic Scale). [1][2]

Similarly, "diatonic" in general English usage might appear in contexts like "diatonic button accordions" or "diatonic palette," evoking a vague sense of "within the basic system." In music theory, however, "diatonic" acquires a strict definition: a seven-note scale built on natural notes and their standard transpositions, exemplified by the Major Diatonic Scale. [1][2]

By re-using these general-English words as technical category-markers, English-language musicology leverages existing lexical familiarity to ease the learning of tonal concepts, while simultaneously embedding evaluative undertones ("major" = principal, "diatonic" = normal, "natural" = unaltered) into the terminology. [1][2]

3. CORE GENERAL-ENGLISH VOCABULARY FOR THE MAJOR DIATONIC SCALE

3.1. "Scale," "step," and "whole/half"

In everyday English, a "scale" can mean a ladder, a measuring device, or a graduated series of values. In music, "scale" becomes a technical object: an ordered sequence of pitches within an octave, most familiarly the Major Diatonic Scale. [4][10]

General-English "step" is similarly re-semanticized as:
- "whole step" = a major second interval
- "half step" = a minor second interval [2][4]

Textbooks routinely describe the Major Diatonic Scale via the formula "W–W–H–W–W–W–H," where English-language learners must mentally map the everyday word "step" onto a fixed intervallic structure. [1][10] Over time, the lexical cluster "whole step–half step–pattern–major scale" becomes a canonical formula that students are expected to reproduce verbatim, even though the words themselves remain identical to their general-English counterparts.

3.2. "Key," "key signature," and "sign"

In general English, "key" may denote a physical key, a metaphorical solution ("the key to success"), or a central idea. In music, "key" becomes a technical descriptor of tonal center and scalar system, paradigmatically tied to the Major Diatonic Scale (e.g., "C major key," "G major key"). [4][10]

Coupled with this is the lexical compound "key signature," where:
- "key" is already re-semanticized into a technical term
- "sign" reintroduces the everyday English word for "symbol" or "mark" to describe sharps and flats at the beginning of staff notation. [2][4]

Thus a double lexical borrowing occurs: general-English "sign"nnames the graphic symbols, while general-English "key" names the tonal system, and together they package the Major Diatonic Scale into a notational-conceptual unit. This lexical economy allows English-medium theory to present the Major Diatonic Scale as both an intervallic pattern and a written convention within a single conceptual frame.

4. SCALE-DEGREE AND FUNCTIONAL VOCABULARY DERIVED FROM GENERAL ENGLISH

4.1. "Degree," "natural," and "name"

In English-language theory, the Major Diatonic Scale is commonly analyzed via scale degrees, and the vocabulary used to describe degrees is itself drawn from general English:

- "Degree" (as in "first degree," "second degree") is borrowed from its general sense of "level" or "order in a series." [2][4]
- "Natural" (as in "natural notes" on the white-key scale) draws on the everyday sense of "un-altered" or "ordinary," which reinforces the idea that the Major Diatonic Scale is the default, unadulterated form of the seven-note system. [1][2]

When textbooks state that "the natural major scale uses only the natural notes of the keyboard," they are using general-English adjectives to construct a normative vocabulary around the Major Diatonic Scale. The lexical choice of "natural" not only labels the absence of sharps or flats but also implies that deviations (sharped or flatted degrees) are, by contrast, "unnatural" or secondary elaborations. [1][2]

4.2. Functional labels built from general English

Many functional labels associated with the Major Diatonic Scale are also constructed from familiar English words:

- "Tonic" (from "tone"-related vocabulary) names the central pitch of the key.
- "Dominant," "subdominant," "mediant," "submediant" are formed from English-language roots denoting positions of strength, subordination, and midpoint. [2][4]

These terms package the Major Diatonic Scale into a hierarchical lexical framework, where general-English relational vocabulary ("sub-," "dominant," "mediant") is repurposed to describe the status of each degree within the tonal system. The result is a technical lexicon that feels intuitively "readable" even to beginners, because its components are cognitively familiar, even though their meanings are now highly constrained. [2][4]

5. LEXICAL PATTERNS IN PEDAGOGICAL ENGLISH

5.1. Formulaic phrases using general-English words

In English-language lesson plans and beginner theory texts, the Major Diatonic Scale is repeatedly taught through formulaic phrases built from general-English vocabulary:

- "Play the Major Diatonic Scale using the pattern W–W–H–W–W–W–H." [1][10]
- "Identify the key of the Major Diatonic Scale from the key signature." [2][4]
- "The natural notes of the keyboard form the C Major Diatonic Scale." [1]

These sentences are constructed almost entirely from everyday English words, with only "diatonic," "key signature," and the interval pattern W–W–H–W–W–W–H as overtly technical elements. The smooth integration of general-English lexemes makes the Major Diatonic Scale appear linguistically accessible, even though its conceptual content remains highly specific.

5.2. Vocabulary banks and word lists for learners

Several English-language repositories for music-theory learners explicitly compile "music vocabulary" from general English. For example, vocabulary lists aimed at English-language learners label words such as "scale," "step," "key," "sharp," "flat," and "tone" as core musical terms, even though these are identical to general-English words. [5][6]

By including these lexemes in "music-theory vocabulary" lists, such resources effectively re-brand general English as a music-theoretical language, reinforcing the idea that fluency in English is, at least in part, a prerequisite for fluency in Western tonal theory. [5][6]

6. IDEOLOGICAL AND COGNITIVE EFFECTS OF GENERAL-ENGLISH LEXICAL BORROWING

6.1. Normalization of the Major Diatonic Scale as default

The widespread use of general-English words to describe the Major Diatonic Scale contributes to its normalization as the default scalar form. Because terms like "scale," "whole step," "half step," and "natural notes" are so intuitively familiar, the Major Diatonic Scale acquires an aura of "naturalness" and "universality," even though it is in fact a historically specific construct tied to Western tonal practice. [1][2]

This lexical normalization is further reinforced by definitions that treat the Major Diatonic Scale as the primary example of a diatonic scale before mentioning minor or modal forms. [2][4] The repetition of phrases such as "major diatonic scale using natural notes" encodes the idea that the Major Diatonic Scale is the unmarked, default configuration of the seven-note system.

6.2. Cognitive economy and lexical effacement

The recycling of general English into music-theoretical vocabulary also produces a cognitive economy: learners need not memorize many new roots; they only need to re-map familiar words onto specific uses. However, this economy comes at an ideological cost: the lexical continuity between everyday English and technical music words obscures the historical and cultural specificity of the Major Diatonic Scale. [1][8]

In effect, the same everyday English words that describe ladders, signatures, and measurements now also describe tonal centrality, intervallic structure, and harmonic function, blurring the boundary between general perception and Western tonal ideology. This effacement means that students may unconsciously accept the Major Diatonic Scale as "the way music is," simply because its description is couched in the most familiar lexical resources of English. [2][10]

7. PEDAGOGICAL AND LINGUISTIC IMPLICATIONS IN MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

7.1. Lexical misalignment in ESL/EFL contexts

In multilingual music-theory classrooms, the re-use of general English words as technical labels can create lexical confusion. A student who knows the everyday meanings of "key," "sign," "step," and "tone" may assume they understand the Major Diatonic Scale, only to discover that:

- "whole step" must equal exactly a major second in the Major Diatonic Scale
- "key signature" must index a specific set of sharps or flats for a given key

This lexical misalignment can slow down conceptual mastery, especially when lessons and textbooks use these terms rapidly and without explicit re-definition. [2][5]

7.2. Code-switching and lexical anchoring

In response, many teachers employ code-switching, using the local language to explain the sound and function of the Major Diatonic Scale while reserving general English terms (e.g., "key," "scale," "step," "sharp," "flat") as the official technical vocabulary. [5][6] This practice reinforces the idea that English serves as the formal, technical lexicon for music theory, while the vernacular remains the domain of intuitive and affective explanation. Over time, this pattern can entrench the perception that theoretical sophistication in music is inseparable from English-language lexical competence. [5][8]

8. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

8.1. Lexical-analysis approach in music-language studies

The central argument of this paper—that English-language musicology repurposes general English vocabulary as technical terminology for the Major Diatonic Scale—points toward a specific research methodology. Scholars could:

- Conduct corpus analyses of English-language theory textbooks to count and categorize the recycling of general English words (e.g., "step," "key," "sign," "tone," "degree") around the Major Diatonic Scale. [4][10]

- Compare the qualitative adjectives used to describe major versus minor or modal forms (e.g., "bright," "happy," "strong" vs. "sad," "mysterious"), tracking how evaluative everyday vocabulary is leveraged to valorize the Major Diatonic Scale. [1][2]

Such studies would deepen understanding of how lexical choices in English shape the cognitive and ideological framing of tonal music.

8.2. Developing conscious lexical pedagogy

Teachers and curriculum designers could respond by developing conscious lexical pedagogy for the Major Diatonic Scale, explicitly distinguishing:

- The everyday meanings of "step," "key," "sign," and "tone"
- Their technical meanings in the context of the Major Diatonic Scale

This approach would help students become aware that general English is not neutral when applied to music; it is being re-coded as a specialized technical register. Such metalinguistic awareness could, in turn, promote more critical engagement with the Western tonal system and open space for alternative scalar and tonal paradigms framed in diverse linguistic traditions. [2][4]

9. CONCLUSION

The vocabulary used to describe the Major Diatonic Scale in English is not an arbitrary list of technical terms; it is largely a recycling of general English vocabulary into a highly specific music-theoretical register. Words such as "scale," "step," "key," "sign," "tone," and "degree" continue to look and feel familiar, even as they are semantically constrained to denote intervallic patterns, tonal centrality, and notational conventions that are historically and culturally specific to Western tonality. [1][2]

By foregrounding this lexical dynamic, the paper shows how English in musicology functions not only as a vehicular language but also as a conceptual architect of the Major Diatonic Scale. The re-use of everyday English words in specialized roles smooths the learning curve while simultaneously naturalizing the Major Diatonic Scale as the default, "normal" form of musical organization. A more explicit, critical, and linguistically sensitive pedagogy could help students see through this lexical seamlessness and recognize that the tonal world of the Major Diatonic Scale is, at least in part, a lexical construction in English rather than an inevitable musical truth.

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