

# DEVELOPING A JAZZ VOCABULARY

The Grammar of Jazz

by Joe Riposo



Published by  
JAMEY AEBERSOLD JAZZ®  
P.O. Box 1244  
New Albany, IN 47151-1244  
[www.jazzbooks.com](http://www.jazzbooks.com)  
ISBN 978-1-56224-284-8

Cover Design & Layout by JASON A. LINDSEY

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## PREFACE

Learning to improvise and playing jazz is much like learning the English language. The language of jazz has all the same ingredients that we have in the English language: nouns, verbs, punctuation, sentences, etc.

An improvised jazz line can be compared to a sentence. A sentence in the English language has meaning and can cause a reaction from the person it is spoken to. An improvised jazz sentence (melodic line) can cause a similar reaction. Language is used to communicate thoughts. Music language is used to communicate musical thoughts.

The English language conveys thoughts as well as feelings. Our language of jazz also conveys thoughts and expresses one's feelings. Jazz is more a language of emotion. The language of jazz can cause a physical response such as dancing, clapping hands or tapping one's foot in time with the music.

However, there are some differences between the two languages. In the English language a word has a fixed meaning. If one shouts, "*FIRE*," you know immediately what to do. No other words are necessary. The words sweet, love, pain, pretty, etc. all have fixed meanings. In the language of jazz a note does not have a fixed meaning. A note only takes on meaning when it is associated with other tones. We need to play a group of notes in a melodic line for the phrase to take on meaning. For example, take this sentence: Bill drove his red car to the store to buy some food. Bill, Car, Food are all nouns; all the other words help to describe what and how Bill completed his task. If we compared this sentence to a musical sentence the nouns Bill, Car, and Food would be peak tones or target tones, sometimes called guide tones. The verbs and descriptive adjectives would be approach tones, which help to define the target tones.

We can end a jazz line with a period or at times with a question mark. The period at the end of the musical sentence would be the resolution, while the question mark could end the musical sentence on a note that does not provide a resolution or release. If we ended the musical sentence on a tri-tone substitution or a dominant chord we might consider that a question or semicolon mark.

Improvised jazz lines become a jazz player's musical sentences (melodic lines), which have never been heard or played before. This is compared to a sentence spoken in our daily conversation that has never been produced before.

When we communicate with others, we do not use memorized sentences and fit them in our conversation. We use our English language to spontaneously produce sentences to convey our thoughts to others.

The part of the brain called the *doesolateral prefrontal cortex*, which is located in the front of the brain and extends to both sides, is not very active during improvisation. This part of the brain is only active when one engages in a planned activity such as giving a prepared speech using written notes. It is active when playing a prepared composition practiced for a performance.

While improvising the *medial pre frontal cortex* located in the center of the brain's frontal lobe displays a lot of activity. This part of the brain is responsible for self-expression. In the English language when one expresses one's feelings or tells a made up story, this part of the brain displays plenty of activity. Using the language of jazz improvisation one tells a musical story.

Other similarities with the English language are the use of inflections and dynamics. In the English language one might at times use slang words. We also have slang tones in our jazz language such as inflections, bends, drops, dynamics, etc.

A jazz player may produce a musical sentence using notes of a Major, Minor, Dorian, Whole Tone, Diminish and other scales. While improvising his musical sentence each scale or row of notes gives the jazz musician different colors with which to work.

Every jazz musician develops his own musical personality based on the way he uses the language of jazz. In fact, an artist can be identified by how he uses the language of jazz. When you hear Charlie Parker, John Coltrane or Stan Getz, you identify the artist immediately only after hearing a few notes. This is because of the artist's sound and vocabulary used in the improvised line. Each player develops his/her own use of grammar in playing improvised jazz lines.

We can analyze both the Jazz and English languages by basically two components: vowels and consonants. The usage of vowels and consonants all become the makeup of your vocabulary to develop an identifiable musical personality

To continue to compare the two languages, let us look at how the brain processes them. Many brain dominance studies comparing how the brain's reaction to stimulation prompted by 1) an improvised musical line and 2) a spoken sentence. Interestingly enough, the brain's reaction is basically the same to both stimuli.

The reaction to music and language may be the same but may occur in different locations in the brain. We must take into consideration that some languages are more musical or more tonal than others. Latin languages are tonal and rhythmic while the Japanese and Chinese languages are very rhythmic and include more inflections. If we examine the German language we would find that it is not very tonal but more guttural sounding.

Both language and music use sequence of sounds. These sounds are strung together to produce specific meanings. The same sounds can be strung together in different ways to produce varied meanings.

We must also be aware that everyone listens to music in different ways. This is to say some people process music basically in their left-brain while others may process music in their right brain. A musician who is analytical might process music in the left-brain while a non-musician will process music in the right brain. This is noted by activity that shows up in the planum temporal area located on the left side of the brain when a musician listens analytically to music. Conversely activity shows up in the planum temporal on the right side of the brain when a non-musician listens to music.

When a musician listens analytically to music, the left side of the brain labels the chord progression and identifies the harmonies. The right brain just enjoys the music it hears by sound. Jazz musicians process music by sound and respond to what is heard without the use of the labels.

The question now becomes how does one practice to play what one does not know. If you play what you know, it is not improvisation. This is why I believe we must learn jazz as a language. The format used in this book will help you to learn the musical grammar of jazz and to use the language of jazz to spontaneously speak an improvised jazz line.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The first few pages of this book will help you understand that jazz improvisation is a language and should be learned as we learn any language.

There are three basic levels involved in the learning process:

- Developing a *knowledge* of ----- (Facts)
- Developing an *understanding* of ----- (Conceptualization)
- Most important of all, *application* of ----- (Using what you learned)

This book is divided into three sections. In the first section we will discuss some of the basic concepts of the language of jazz that will help you to accumulate needed knowledge. In the second section you will develop your understanding of the knowledge obtained. This is when you will conceptualize the knowledge and build an understanding of why it is comparable to the English language. In the last section of the book you will have the opportunity to apply your knowledge. Needless to say, this is the most important part of the learning sequence. Here is where you practice to perfect what has been learned in the previous sections of the book.

The format used in this book will share with you the experience of learning how and why you need to develop a jazz vocabulary. To become fluent in speaking the language of jazz one needs to develop a large vocabulary.

You will also be provided with many examples of how to use your new jazz vocabulary. By no means am I suggesting you learn a bunch of jazz licks or as I refer to it as a bag of licks. By playing these examples and remembering the concept surrounding the manufacturing of the examples, you will begin to build an understanding of how the language is used.

Learning takes place when you apply knowledge after you have developed an understanding of it. Once again, the important three words to remember in the learning process are, *Knowledge, Understanding and Application.*

Keep in mind the most important part of this process is the application. Learning the language of jazz is a participatory experience. You should practice using this teaching sequence with every tune you learn. The more you use the concept, the faster you will be able to automatically apply it to your improvised line.

I strongly suggest you use the Jamey Aebersold Play-A-Long recordings and use your newly developed improvisational skill. **Jamey Aebersold** provides you with your own private rhythm section to practice with.

## COMPARING THE ENGLISH & JAZZ LANGUAGE

One must become familiar with grammar to learn to fluently speak any language whether it is the English or Jazz language. If we examine words in the English language we will discover that they are made up of vowels and consonants.

A musical sentence needs to be made up of vowels and consonants. The consonants provide the tension in the musical phrase and the vowels give us the needed release.

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Vowels = A, E, I, O, U

Consonants = All the other letters of the alphabet

Outside notes are notes that are not in the basic chord or scale.

### JAZZ LANGUAGE

Vowels = Basic chord tones

G7 – G, B, D, F  
1, 3, 5, 7

Consonants = All the other non-chord tones

G7 – A, C, E  
2, 4, 6

Outside notes = Ab, Bb, Db, Eb, Gb  
b2, b3, #4/b5, #5/b6 b1

If we examine the musical alphabet in the key of C Major C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C (C Scale), we will discover that placed over the C Major 7 chord, we have produced Vowels and Consonants. The notes which sound best on the C Major 7 chord would be the chord tones C, E, G, B. These are the notes we consider vowels. All of the other tones in the C major scale are considered consonants. We can also use non-chord tones such as the #4/b5 and #5/b6 etc. These notes are referred to as outside notes.

To make a musical line interesting we need to use both vowels (chord tones) and consonants (non-chord tones). If we play a jazz line using only vowels the phrase will lose direction and forward motion. If we use only consonants in a jazz line it will sound abstract and have no key center or point of reference. One must find the right balance to create an interesting jazz line. This is what becomes a part of one's musical personality. This is one reason why we can identify players like Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Stan Getz, etc. after only hearing one or two musical sentences.

Let us examine some of the vowels and consonants of basic chord scales used in constructing jazz lines. There are three basic chords and chord scales in a key center, which contain a mix of vowels and consonants.

The 1<sup>st</sup> key center we will work with is the key of C. The three basic chords are;

- CMaj7 = IMaj.7
- Dm7 = ii7
- G7 = V7

KEY: V = Vowel C = Consonant



This example demonstrates the same concept in a vertical position.



These are the vowels of a C Major7 chord. They are all chord tones defining the chord's harmonic sound.



These are the consonants of a C Maj7 chord. (non-chord tones)

There are notes we consider outside notes that can be used very effectively over the CMaj7 chord.

C#, D#, F#, G#, and Bb.

Let us now look at the minor ii7 chords. As a reminder all the notes in the Dorian scale are good notes to play, but you need to make it sound like a musical sentence. The improvised line needs to be constructed with vowels and consonants.



Notice we also have a mix of vowels and consonants in the Dorian scale.