

Facing metaphors as the most complex iconic signs: Toward a synthetic analysis of figuration in Greek street art

Georgios Stampoulidis, Lund University

Marianna Bolognesi, Oxford University

Jordan Zlatev, Lund University

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[@georgiosstampoulidis](#)

[#streetartcogsem](#)

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Outline

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2. Polysemiotic communication vs. Multimodality
3. Metaphor in cognitive linguistics and semiotics
4. Metaphor: a cognitive semiotic approach
5. The Motivation and Sedimentation Model
6. An empirical study: results
7. Street art metaphors (metaphorical expressions):
 - Examples, Implications, Conclusions

Street art: defining street art is not an easy task!

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Street art encompasses unsanctioned and mainly illegal practices, which take place in an urban “publicly accessible space” (Bengtson, 2018), including visual interventions in the streets, such as pasteup, posters, stickers, drawings, large wall paintings, cut-outs, stencils and even sculptures and 3D installations (e.g., Bengtson, 2014; Lewisohn, 2008; Philipps, 2015).



Graffiti: *legal* and *illegal* situated practices in urban space



Legal graffiti, some degree of regulation and permanence, controlled by a curator/organization



Illegal graffiti as occurring in the streets and thus with inference of the police



Illegal graffiti as occurring at abandoned places and thus without inference of the police

Crucial definitional characteristics of street art

- **Openness** in the sense of participatory (social) sense-making and interaction within and across its recipients because of its installment in the urban environment, but also in the sense that it may be readable to a wide audience
- **Unsanctioned** in the sense that street artists may intervene, either legally or illegally, in the urban space without external fundings and sponsors, by intentionally making the urban environment a site for exploration and potential change since they never become routine
- **Ephemerality** in the sense that street art may not be meant to last for long, as artworks continuously change and evolve throughout time, or may be just removed
- **Playfulness** in the sense of potential figurality and rhetoricalness
- **Contemporariness** in the sense that street art is supposedly part-and-parcel of what is happening in a society in a specific time and space

NEVER TRUST
A
HIPPIE...



REUSE
GLASS



SAVE THE
PLANET

I DIED FOR



YOUR SINS

Polysemiotic Communication vs. multimodality

Semiotic systems = *signs with system-specific properties, and inter-sign relations, in which metaphors and other rhetorical figures can be expressed: language, gesture and depiction*

Modalities = *sensory modalities (senses), such as sight (visual), hearing (auditory), smell (olfactory), touch (tactile), taste (gustatory) and possibly others like proprioception (body awareness). This is what we understand as “multimodality” through which we perceive both the world and signs*



A **polysemiotic monomodal** street artwork since it triggers (arguably) the sense of sight in the viewer, but includes multiple semiotic systems

A **unisemiotic monomodal** street artwork since it triggers (arguably) the sense of sight in the viewer, but includes only the semiotic system of depiction

A **polysemiotic and multimodal** street artwork since it may trigger multiple senses in the viewer, such as sight and touch

A **unisemiotic and multimodal** street artwork since it may trigger multiple senses in the viewer, such as sight, touch, and smell (?)

Polysemiotic

Unisemiotic

Polysemiotic

Unisemiotic

Monomodal

Multimodal

Metaphor in cognitive linguistics (and beyond)

- **Universal or cultural?** (e.g., Casasanto, 2017; Cameron et al., 2009; Müller, 2008)
- **Unconscious or conscious?** (e.g., Steen, 2011; Zlatev, 2011)
- **Methodology: metaphors in discourse/context?** (e.g., Musolff, 2004; Zinken, 2007)
- **If "in cognition", where beyond language?** (e.g., Mittelberg, 2008; Forceville, 2009)

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

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Source-target mapping for the **LIFE IS GAMBLING GAME** conceptual metaphor (adapted from Kövecses 2010).

"The locus of metaphor is **not in language at all but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another**" (Lakoff 1993:1).

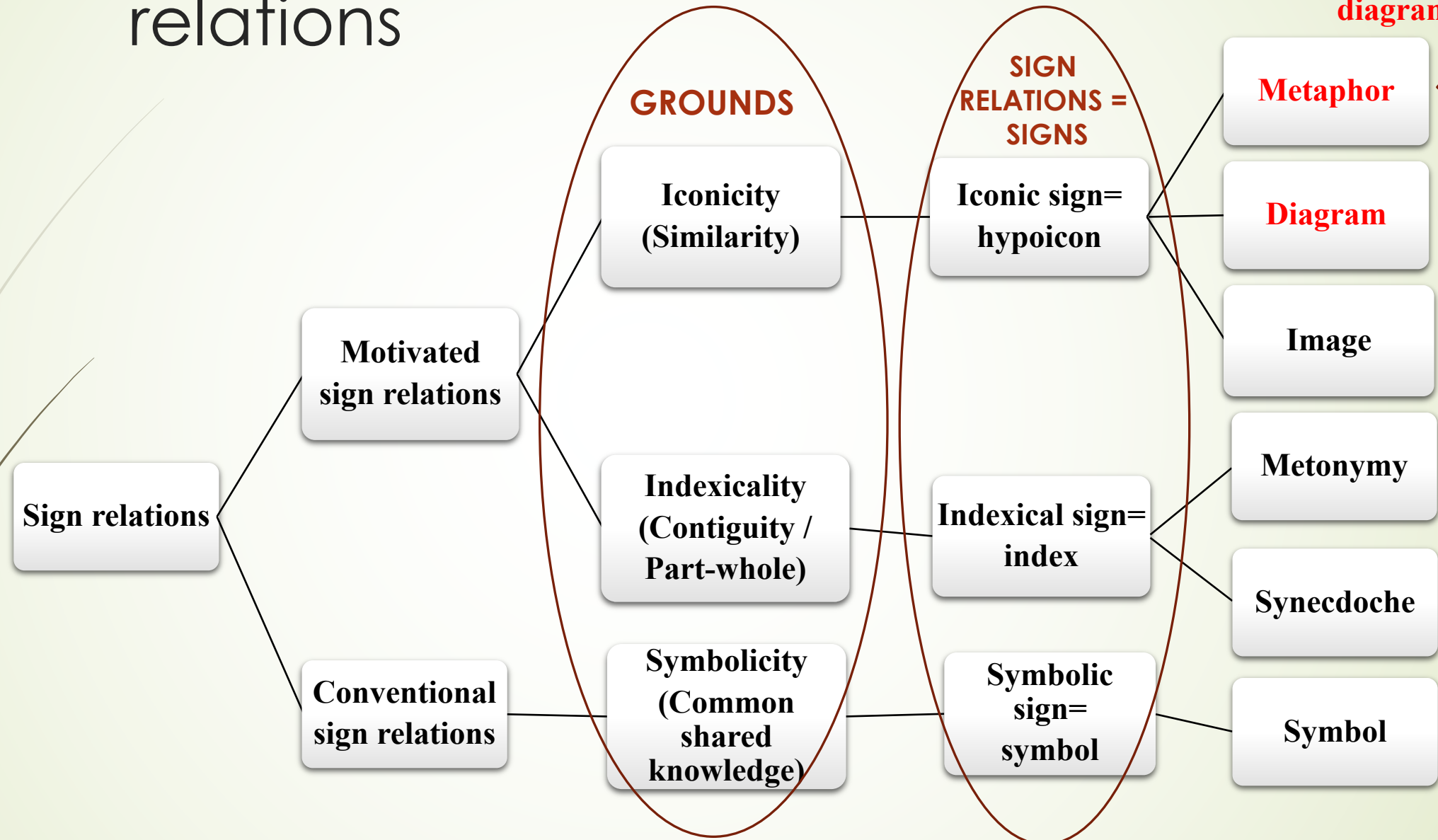
Source: GAMBLING GAME	Cognitive correspondences (Mapping)	Target: LIFE
PLAYERS	→	LIVING BEINGS (HUMANS)
PLAYMATES	→	CO-LIVING BEINGS, CO-CITIZENS
COOPERATIVE PLAY	→	SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
DISTANCE COVERED	→	PROGRESS MADE
DIFFICULTY RATINGS	→	DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED
BETS MAKING	→	LIFE CHOICES
GAME-WINNING	→	BEING SUCCESSFUL IN LIFE

Metaphor in semiotics

- Metaphor is a particular kind of **sign** (process) that **presupposes conscious awareness** and requires the experiencing subject to both associate and differentiate expression and content (Sonesson, 2015)
- **Three types of (hypo)icons:** imagistic (images), diagrammatic (diagrams), and metaphorical (metaphors), all grounded in similarity (Peirce, 1931/1974)
- **For Peirce:** metaphor is “one level higher” than that of diagram (Hausman 1996; Lance 2006), implying that the diagram/analogy/mapping is **waiting to be discovered and creatively interpreted in various possible and contextually appropriate ways** (Sonesson, 2015)



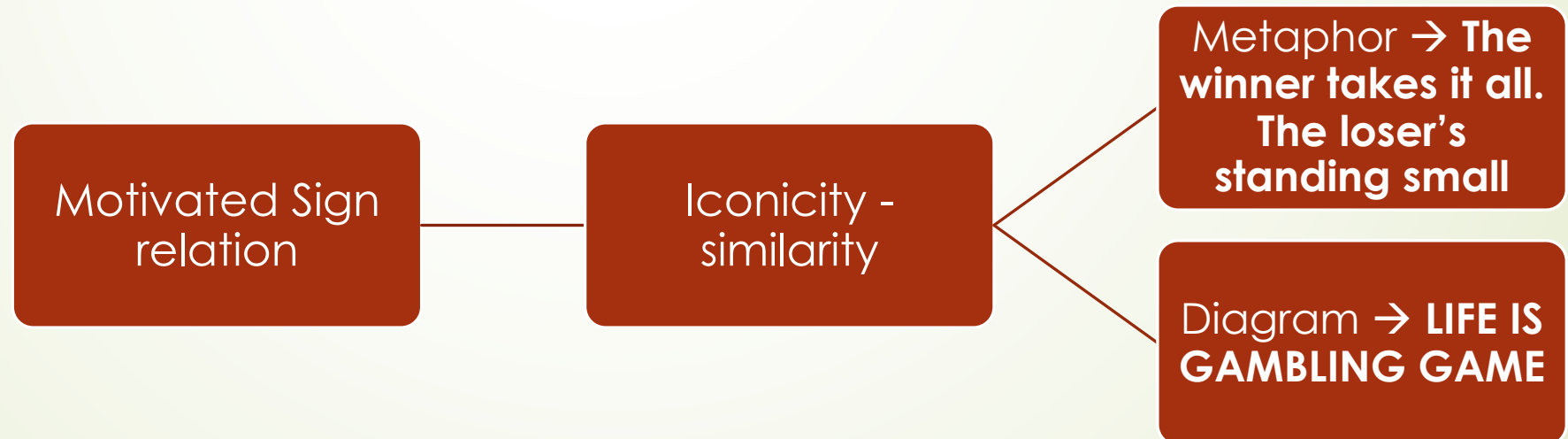
A hierarchical organization of sign relations



Diagrams and metaphors in *language*

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- ▶ **LIFE IS GAMBLING GAME** conceptual metaphor is in itself a **diagram**
- ▶ A creative expression like “**The winner takes it all. The loser’s standing small**” taken from a popular ABBA song, can function as a **metaphor** that requires the kind of diagram above for its interpretation
- ▶ **Metaphors are the most complex iconic signs (Peirce [1931/1974])** especially when understood as **creative, emergent and dynamic processes, socio-culturally grounded and contextually influenced**: a view that has been gaining currency in both cognitive linguistics and semiotics (Kövecses, 2015; Müller, 2008; Sonesson, 2015)



Diagrams and metaphors in *depiction*

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“Greece is in a crappy situation” (now: yes directionality)



A unisemiotic monomodal street artwork.
Metaphor: **GREEK FLAG** \equiv **TOILET PAPER**

Dirtiness



a more directly given (“source”)

Iconicity + Tension



Greece: bad sociopolitical situation



First: no directionality

a more relevant for the context (“target”)

Pictorial incongruity
(strong form of tension)

Iconicity
(similarity, analogy, mapping)

The **degree of iconicity** between toilet paper and Greek flag co-exists with **various degrees of tension**, from mild ambiguity to obvious incongruity: **METAPHORICITY**

Research questions

- ▶ How does universal, cultural-specific and context-sensitive knowledge interact in metaphor use?
- ▶ To what extent are metaphors creative in terms of the author's intentions and perceiver's interpretation?
- ▶ How are metaphors expressed within and across semiotic systems like language, gesture and depiction, and instantiated in particular socio-cultural media?



A cognitive semiotic approach should

1. Account for issues such as **universality, conventionality, context-sensitivity, cross-cultural variation, creativity and “multimodality”**
2. Consider **different semiotic systems** – language, gesture, depiction – and combinations of these
3. Consider **not only (static) mappings**
4. Consider **situated and socio-culturally dependent sign use** and hence a **dynamic process** of experiencing one thing in terms of another, giving rise to both **tension and iconicity** between the two “things” (meanings, experiences, concepts) in a specific real-life context

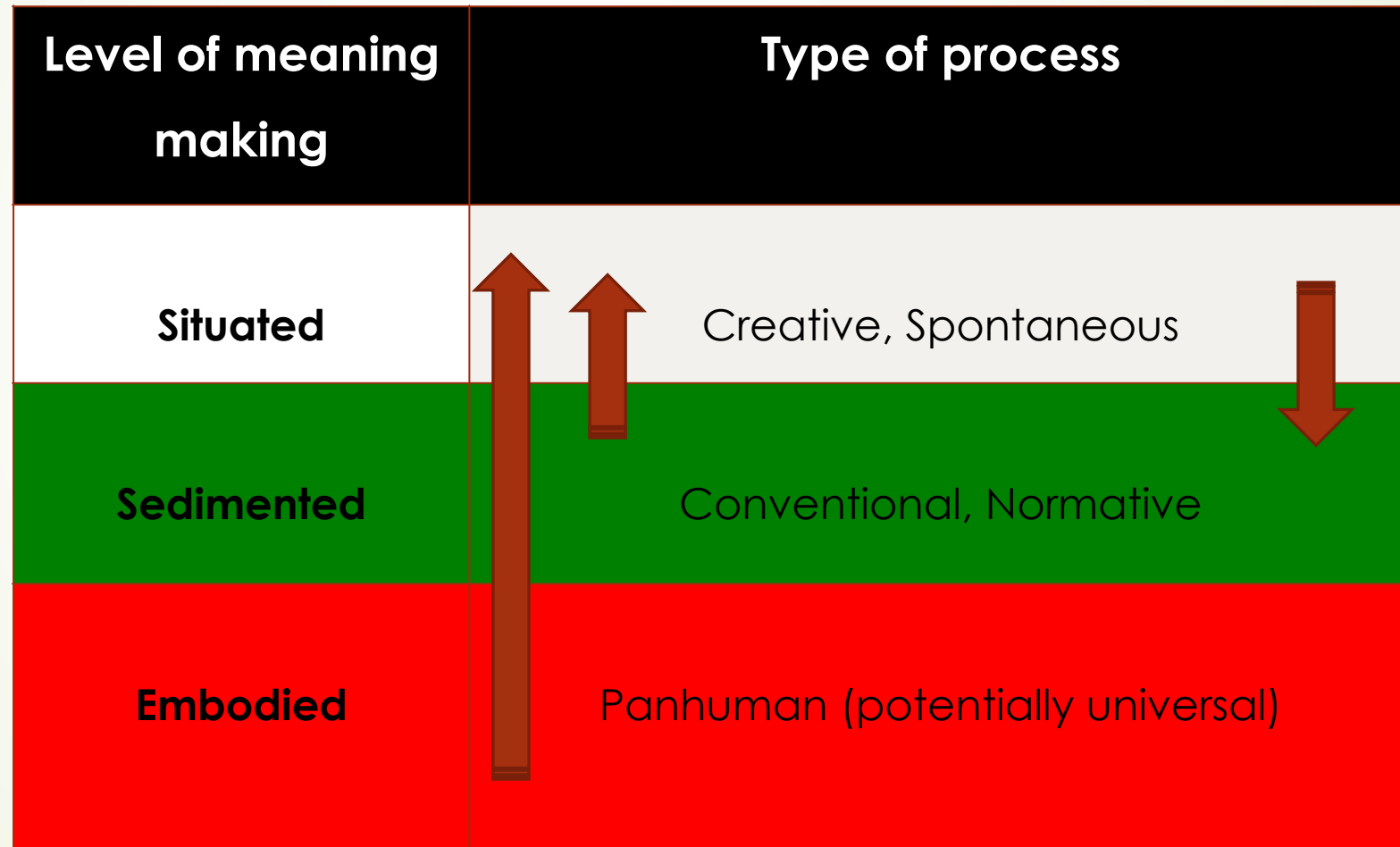
Metaphor: a (theoretical) definition

- ▶ **an expression** in a **given semiotic system** (or a combination of systems) with
 - a) at least two different potential interpretations (**tension**)
 - b) standing in an **iconic relationship (similarity/analogy)** with each other, where
 - c) one interpretation is more relevant in the **communicative context**, and
 - d) can be understood in part by **comparison with the less relevant interpretation**

Motivation and Sedimentation Model

- ▶ Inspired by concepts from **phenomenology** (Husserl, 1901/1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) and **integral linguistics** (Coseriu, 1985, 2000) the **Motivation and Sedimentation Model** distinguishes between three basic levels of meaning:
 - ▶ the embodied
 - ▶ the sedimented
 - ▶ the situated
- ▶ and links these with two operations: *motivation*  and *sedimentation* 

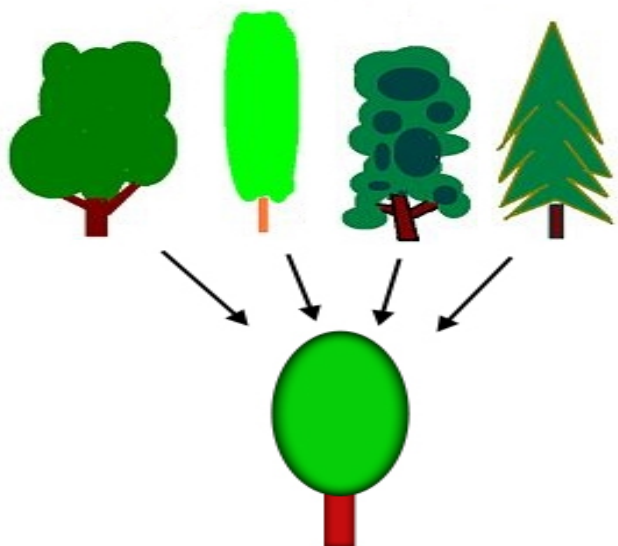
Motivation and Sedimentation Model



The Embodied level



- Non-linguistic experiential processes and structures:
 - bodily mimesis (Donald, 1998)
 - categorization (Rosch, 1977)
 - analogy-making (Gentner and Markman, 1997)
 - diagrammatic iconicity (Devylder, 2018)



The Sedimented level

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- Social and linguistic norms (Itkonen, 2008a)
- Shared cultural beliefs, histories, ideologies and symbols (Forceville, 2017)
- Background sociocultural knowledge, genre conventions and historical awareness (Stampoulidis and Bolognesi, under review)



The Situated level

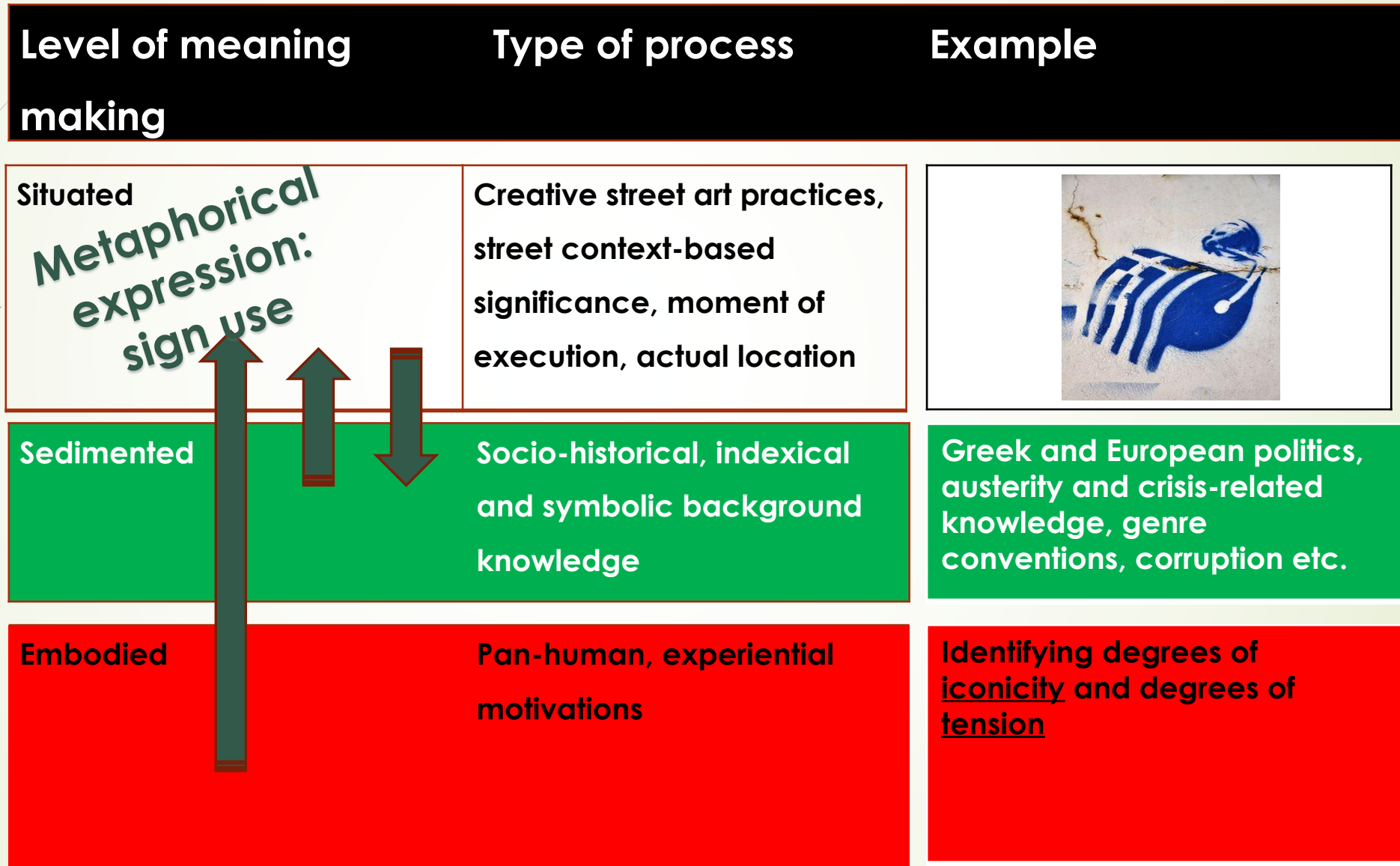
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- Dynamic, creative and tightly dependent on the immediate context and ongoing social interaction (Cameron et al., 2009; Müller, 2008; Müller and Tag, 2010)
- The level of emergent contextual meanings, subject to interpretation and play (Kolter et al., 2012)



Motivation and Sedimentation Model to metaphors in street art: *an example*



Empirical study (Stampoulidis and Bolognesi, under review)

- *Reasoning*: Identification and interpretation of metaphors and other rhetorical figures in street art – 2 analysts
- *Data*: 50 images (street artworks) – between 2014 and 2018 self-collected in Athens, Greece
- *Method*: a step-wise data-driven procedure along the lines of cognitive semiotics paradigm
- *Results*:
 - 32/50 images were identified as metaphorical
 - High intersubjective agreement in relation to **the identification of incongruities and iconicity (embodied level)**
 - Low intersubjective agreement in relation to **the interpretation of metaphorical expressions due to differences in socio-cultural knowledge (sedimented level) and the local pragmatic context (situated level)**
- Full intersubjective agreement in only 5/32 images

Street art metaphors: Examples, Implications, Conclusions



“EU Politics is Disneyland” (now: yes directionality)

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A polysemiotic monomodal street artwork.
Metaphor: **MERKEL ≡ MINNIE MOUSE**

A fictive, and somewhat ridiculous, character
Minnie Mouse → frivolity -
Disneyland



a more directly
given (“source”)

Iconicity + Tension

CONTENTS

Angela
Merkel → EU
Politics

First: no directionality



a more relevant for the
context (“target”)

Pictorial incongruity
(strong form of
tension)

Iconicity
(similarity, analogy,
mapping)

The **degree of iconicity** between toilet paper and Greek flag co-exists with **various degrees of tension**, from mild ambiguity to obvious incongruity:
METAPHORICITY

Implications for street art metaphors

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Artist's perspective

- ▶ Street art metaphors are the result of the **street artists' intentions and actions at the moment of execution**, which are **ultimately creative and socio-politically motivated**, aiming to trigger their viewers' attention and raise awareness about contemporary social and political issues
- ▶ **Ephemerality and site-specificity/time-specificity**
- ▶ **The actual location (as site)** and the street artworks' inseparability from their **situated environment – non-commercial street context**

Recipient's (analyst's) perspective

Universal or cultural?

- All three levels of meaning making (embodied/sedimented/situated)

Unconscious or conscious?

- **At least marginally conscious comparison** of categorically distinct (sets of) signs : "Source" and "Target" CONTENTS and presupposes finding iconicity (similarity, analogy) and tension between them

Methodology: metaphors in discourse/context?

- Largely dependent on the situated level of meaning making presupposing the norms of the sedimented level and the cognitive processes of the embodied level

If "in cognition", where beyond language?

- can be expressed in any semiotic system (here: language and depiction)

Conclusions

- ▶ We propose a **synthetic cognitive semiotic approach**, combining insights from cognitive linguistics and semiotics
- ▶ This approach presupposes that metaphorical expression (sign use) **is a conscious process** of experiencing one thing in terms of another, giving rise to both **tension** and **iconicity** between the two “things” (CONTENTS, MEANINGS, EXPERIENCES, CONCEPTS)
- ▶ Metaphors can be expressed in **various semiotic systems** other than language, **instantiated in the socio-cultural medium of street art**, very often in polysemiotic combinations, using one or more sensory modalities
- ▶ Metaphorical interpretation is ultimately **a matter of situated and socio-culturally-dependent sign use** and hence a **dynamic process in a specific real-life context**
- ▶ Our approach implies a **scale of metaphoricity** that can be enacted to different degrees (**iconicity, tension**) largely dependent on the situated level of meaning making



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Thank you!

Georgios Stampoulidis

(georgios.stampoulidis@semiotik.lu.se)

Marianna Bolognesi, Jordan Zlatev



@georgiosstampoulidis

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