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The Saussurean architecture of meaning in Kövecses's *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*

Abstract: Ferdinand de Saussure's lasting impact on modern linguistics has been extensively explored, particularly his structural semiotic model, a model where arbitrary signs gain meaning through relational differences within a socially constructed system. However, the connection between this model and recent approaches to figurative meaning remains underexplored. The present study addresses this gap by examining Zoltán Kövecses's *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (ECMT) through a Saussurean lens. The argument is that ECMT treats figurative meaning as motivated by bodily experience, yet not predetermined, remaining open to contextual and culturally shaped variation – thus retaining a role for a Saussurean notion of arbitrariness, but at the level of selection and interpretation rather than at the level of conceptual grounding. ECMT further reinterprets the langue-parole distinction in cognitive terms: rather than treating langue as an abstract linguistic system, it emphasises the existence of entrenched conceptual patterns that function as shared resources for meaning construction. Parole is recast as a dynamic, online semiotic process, whereby speakers construct mental spaces in real time, selectively activating and integrating these shared patterns to make sense of situated experience. Through repeated use in discourse, some locally constructed metaphors may stabilise and become entrenched, feeding back into the shared cultural conceptual repertoire.

Keywords: CMT; discourse metaphor; ECMT; embodiment; Saussure; blending

1 Introduction

Cognitively-oriented work on metaphor can be described as a continuum that moves from stable conceptual structures to flexible, situated processes of meaning-making. At the two ends of this continuum lie *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (CMT) and

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Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (ECMT), with work on *conceptual blending* and *conceptual framing* occupying the middle ground.

Lakoff and Johnson's CMT (e.g., Lakoff 1987, 1993; Lakoff and Johnson 1980), along with its extensive development in the literature, is based on a two-domain model in which an A IS B structure represents the conceptualisation of a more abstract domain of experience (A) in terms of a more concrete one (B). Conceptual mappings of this kind (i.e., conceptual metaphors) form coherent, hierarchically organised systems grounded in embodied experience. At the base are *image schemas* – skeletal patterns such as MOTION, SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, and CONTAINER – which provide structural templates for meaning (Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987). These schemas support *primary metaphors* – simple unidirectional mappings from concrete, embodied experiences to abstract concepts, rooted in recurrent correlations in everyday life, such as TIME IS MOTION and THE FUTURE IS AHEAD (Grady 1997). Multiple primary metaphors and image schematic patterns combine to form complex metaphors, like LIFE IS A JOURNEY, representing life as purposeful movement in time/along a path with direction, progress, and goals (Lakoff 1989; Lakoff and Johnson 1999).

The incorporation of the construct of *mental space*, which originates in *Conceptual Blending Theory* (CBT) (Fauconnier [1985] 1994, 2007; Fauconnier and Turner 2002), into the study of metaphor brought about a shift from the static, offline view presented in CMT towards a more dynamic understanding of figurative meaning. CBT elaborates CMT by departing from the notion of direct mappings between whole conceptual domains. Instead, it proposes that meaning arises from the integration of multiple *mental spaces* – partial, context-dependent representations of knowledge constructed online. These spaces are selectively projected from source and target domains into a mental space, creating novel inferences through a process of conceptual fusion. The resulting blend often contains emergent structure, which indicates that semantic content is not inherited directly from either input space but constructed dynamically through the interaction of pre-existing knowledge structures. For example, in the metaphor THE SURGEON IS A BUTCHER, the negative connotation does not stem from the input domains themselves as both professions require skilled individuals, but from the emergent meaning produced by juxtaposing incompatible goals (healing vs. violence), which generates a powerful evaluative inference (Coulson and Oakley 2000; Fauconnier and Turner 2002).

Similarly, work on discourse metaphor emphasises the partial activation of domains through the process of framing. "Framing" is defined by Entman as involving the selection of some aspects of a perceived reality, or a domain of experience, making them "more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman 1993, p. 52).

Metaphorical framing varies across cultures and discourse communities. This variation can be demonstrated through LIFE IS A JOURNEY. In many Western cultures, the metaphor emphasises individualism, personal progress, and goal-oriented action, whereas in non-Western cultures, it may highlight communal experiences, spiritual development, or interconnectedness, with individualistic or purely progress-driven interpretations backgrounded (see Kövecses 2005, 2010). The everyday expression *to be on the right path* illustrates this variation: while in many Western contexts it typically conveys personal alignment with one's individual goals or identity, in more collectivist cultural settings it can signify adherence to a shared moral or social path – one that members of a community are expected to follow together.

In a discourse community like healthcare, this same metaphor, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, is often framed in terms of violence-related scenarios to make sense of illness experiences, where the journey of life is interrupted, challenged, or re-narrated during a period of suffering or uncertainty. Examples such as describing oneself as having been *engaged in a battle* or *knocked off course* foreground disruption, unpredictability, and endurance, systematically framing life in terms of ENGAGING IN BATTLE and ATTACK FROM A PHYSICAL AGENT scenarios (Semino et al. 2018, pp. 637–638).

Systematic discourse metaphors like the above-mentioned examples do more than frame "the ideas, attitudes and values of discourse participants" (Cameron et al. 2010, p. 137). They also actively shape social reality. For example, framing healthcare reform as a "battle" implies conflict and struggle, often focusing on the adversarial nature of policy changes, while describing it as a "journey" emphasises progress, adaptation, and long-term goals. Though both metaphorical frames address challenges in healthcare, they evoke different emotional responses, ideologies, and institutional approaches (see Semino et al. 2018; White and Herrera 2003; Zinken 2003). Thibodeau and Boroditsky's (2011) experimental work strengthens such discourse-based findings by demonstrating a causal effect of metaphorical framing on reasoning and decision-making: metaphors guide the solutions people consider and the information they seek by activating frame-consistent inferences, thereby shaping how individuals and institutions understand and act upon social problems.

A wealth of experimental and linguistic research, often drawing on gesture studies, supports the notion of discourse metaphor, illustrating how metaphorical systems operate as cross-domain, cross-modal cognitive mappings that reflect and shape socio-cultural reality (see, for example, Bergen 2012; Boroditsky 2000; Boroditsky 2001; Cameron and Deignan 2006; Cienki and Müller 2008; Evans 2013; Gibbs and Cameron 2008; Kövecses 2010, 2015; Semino 2008; Zinken 2007). While this body of research explores how metaphors are actively framed and negotiated within specific sociocultural and discourse communities, its main concern, as a usage-based approach

(see Langacker 1987), is to show how frequent usage of metaphor gives rise to stable patterns in form, content, affect, and pragmatics (Cameron and Deignan 2006).

In his ECMT, Kövecses (2020a, 2020b) unifies previous approaches by offering a model that organises all levels of conceptual mappings within a single schematic hierarchy. This is a bottom-up model that accounts for both offline and online aspects of metaphor. The offline dimension encompasses the relatively stable, multilevel system of conceptual structures, spanning from culturally specific frames and domains entrenched through frequent use to universal embodied patterns that ground metaphorical thought. The online dimension captures the real-time, situated use of these patterns, which occurs in a richly textured mental space where contextual meaning is constructed through the activation of selected structures from the multilevel conceptual system.

Focusing on ECMT as a theory of meaning construction, this study offers an original theoretical perspective by examining it through a Saussurean lens (Saussure 1916/1959). The argument developed resonates with Danesi's (2022) reinterpretation of Saussure's notion of arbitrariness, which reaffirms that while the link between form and meaning is not natural or given, it operates within a structured semiotic system in which meaning arises from relational patterns shaped by social and cultural convention. ECMT's multilevel analysis of metaphor is seen to provide a dynamic account of how this process unfolds in real language use, showing that metaphor functions as systematically organised yet flexible: conceptual metaphors are embodied, domain-level mappings grounded in recurrent patterns of bodily experience, perception, and action. While these mappings are experientially motivated, their realisation is dynamic and context-sensitive, allowing them to adapt to particular communicative and cultural situations. Accordingly, arbitrariness in ECMT may be said to be redefined not as randomness but as openness to adaptation across experiential and contextual conditions. The main research question (RQ) the study aims to answer may thus be formulated as follows:

RQ: By showing that metaphor functions as a structured yet flexible, multilevel semiotic resource, does ECMT address the tension between *arbitrariness* (emphasised in Saussure's structuralism) and *experientialism* (central to traditional CMT and later usage-based approaches to conceptual metaphor)?

The study is structured as follows. First, it sketches Saussure's structuralist thought on language. Second, it examines the influence of this thought on earlier cognitive linguistic frameworks. The study proceeds by summarising ECMT and then discussing with examples how the theory reconfigures the key Saussurean principles of *arbitrariness*, *relationality* and *langue* and *parole* within a dynamic, cognitive semiotic model of figurative meaning construction that reconciles embodied

motivation with culturally conditioned variability in metaphor. The study ends with a summary of key points and a suggestion for further research.

2 Saussure

Saussure's structuralism emerged in (1916/1959) with the posthumous publication of *Cours de linguistique générale* by his students Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. It views language as a semiotic system made up of signs. Each sign consists of two parts: the *signifier* (the sound image or written form of a word) and the *signified* (the concept it represents). The connection between the signifier and signified is *arbitrary*. That is, there is no natural or inherent reason why a particular word (e.g., *cat*) refers to a particular entity ("a cat"). The association is a product of social convention within a language community. Because the word-meaning connection is conceptual (rather than motivated by any intrinsic resemblance), languages are free to evolve independently.

Saussure complements the notion of arbitrariness with that of *relationality* – a principle that manifests both vertically in *paradigmatic relations* and horizontally in *syntagmatic relations*. Within this relational system, the meaning of a word such as *cat* arises from its contrasts with other paradigmatically related terms, such as *dog, lion,* and *tiger*. Relational differences extend beyond individual words to broader binary oppositions like *male/female, hot/cold,* or *alive/dead* that structure thought and meaning. Each term is defined not by inherent content, but by what it is not: "concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not" (Saussure 1916/1959, p. 117). For example, *hot* is meaningful because it is not *cold*; *male* exists in opposition to *female*. Without these oppositions, the semantic boundaries would collapse or become indistinct. This is a paradigmatic relation, in which words that can substitute for one another create meaning through opposition. However, a word also gains meaning horizontally through its place in syntagmatic chains – how it functions in relation to other signs in actual usage. For example, in the sentence *The cat fed the kitten*, the word *cat* derives meaning from its horizontal (syntagmatic) relations with *fed* and *kitten*, each helping to define the structure of the sentence and the role of *cat* within it. These co-occurrences illustrate how words gain relational significance through the context in which they appear, complementing the vertical (paradigmatic) distinctions *cat* has with words like *dog* or *lion* in the broader system of language.

Building on the idea of relationality, Saussure (1916/1959) distinguished between *langue* and *parole* to account for the dual nature of language. Langue refers to the relatively stable, socially shared system of signs that provides the framework for

meaning, while parole encompasses individual acts of speech, where speakers deploy this system in concrete communicative contexts. This distinction highlights that meaning is both systemically structured and contextually realised, reflecting the interplay between social conventions and individual usage – a distinction at the heart of ECMT and other cognitive linguistics approaches.

3 Saussure in cognitive linguistics

Cognitive linguistics can be seen as a departure from Saussure's foundational principle of arbitrariness, as it emphasises the experiential nature of meaning. Still, as Nerlich and Clarke noted, "There are some obvious links between Saussurean linguistics and the Cognitive Linguistics research program" (2007, p. 579). Langacker (1987, p. 11) explicitly acknowledges the foundational role of Saussure's notion of the *linguistic sign* as a sound-image pairing in his Cognitive Grammar (see also Taylor 1999, p. 19).

However, cognitive linguistics does not simply adopt Saussure's concepts as they stand. Rather, it systematically re-functionalises them to align with a cognitively grounded model of meaning. With respect to linguistic signs, for example, Evans and Green (2006) note that cognitive approaches to grammar draw on Saussure's concept of the linguistic sign, but reinterpret it in cognitive terms as a symbolic unit – a form–meaning pairing linking linguistic expression to experientially-grounded conceptual structure. In Langacker's Cognitive Grammar, for instance, every linguistic expression (from morphemes to full constructions) is analysed as "imagic in character" (Langacker 1986, p. 16) in the sense that its meaning is understood against conceptual structures that reflect recurrent patterns of human embodied experience. The transitive construction (*The girl opened the door*), for example, is associated with an "action chain" conceptualisation in which an agent acts upon and affects an object, drawing on the everyday experience of exerting force and causing change. Similarly, in Goldberg's (1995) Construction Grammar, constructions like the ditransitive pattern (e.g., *She gave him a book*) are treated as form-meaning pairings typically associated with a broadly experienced scenario of "transfer" or letting-have.

Another key adaptation concerns the Saussurean notion of *relationality.* Reda (2016) points out that this notion is foundational to cognitive approaches to meaning, as they likewise view meaning as emerging from internal relations within a system rather than from external reference. However, whereas Saussure grounded meaning in a system of differences among signs, cognitive linguistics reinterprets relational structuring in terms of similarity, family resemblance, and graded category membership, thereby shifting from a differential to a usage- and experience-based model of meaning organisation.

To demonstrate, Prototype Theory (Rosch 1975, 1978) proposes that categories are organised around central exemplars, where category members are included based on their degree of similarity to the culturally salient prototype, forming a radial structure. For instance, in many Western contexts, a *robin* is considered a more prototypical bird than a *penguin* or an *ostrich* because it shares more features with culturally familiar and statistically common experiences of birds: less typical members are interpreted relative to more central exemplars.

Clearly, the social dimension of experience plays a crucial role in how relationality is reconceptualised within cognitive linguistics. In this view, meaning is relational because speakers draw on socially shared conceptual patterns when organising and interpreting experience. Reda (2016) highlights that this social grounding of meaning remains central, even as cognitive linguistics moves beyond a purely structural model. A useful illustration of this is Fillmore's (1982) Frame Semantics. This theory is based on the understanding that a word requires access to background knowledge structures, or frames, that organise speakers' cultural experience (e.g., social practices, roles, and institutions). For example, interpreting lexical items such as *buy*, *sell*, or *cost* involves drawing on the COMMERCIAL EVENT frame, which includes role elements such as buyer, seller, goods, and money. Each term profiles a different aspect of this shared scenario. Although Fillmore's account does not follow Saussure in defining meaning primarily through oppositions among neighbouring signs (e.g., *buy* vs. *purchase*), it aligns with the social dimension of structuralism in viewing meaning as socially grounded rather than purely referential or individual. In this way, Frame Semantics extends the social dimension of Saussure's structuralism by relocating relationality from the linguistic system to culturally distributed conceptual knowledge.

A different form of relational structuring is found in Cognitive Grammar. Langacker (1986) proposes that meaning is organised through *profile-base* relations, in which a linguistic expression (the profile) highlights a substructure against a broader conceptual background (the base). For example, *tip* profiles the endpoint of an elongated object, which functions as its conceptual base (Langacker 1986, p. 7). Conceptual domains are further embedded within domain matrices, so that *knuckle* is understood in relation to *finger*, *hand*, and *body*. While this framework also emphasises relational meaning, the types of relations involved, figure-ground and conceptual-dependence relations, differ from the contrastive structural differences characteristic of Saussurean semiology and the resemblance-based family structures of Prototype Theory. In this way, Langacker retains a relational perspective on meaning while adapting it to a cognitively grounded, hierarchically organised model that captures the experientially motivated nature of conceptual structure.

The Saussurean principle of relationality also underlies Langacker's notion of *construal* (Langacker 1986, 2008), but with a key shift: meaning is no longer analysed

only within the linguistic system, but at the cognitive level of how individual speakers mentally represent and structure what they express. Langacker demonstrates that meaning is shaped not only by lexical choice but also by how the speaker mentally frames a situation (i.e., what they focus on, how they allocate attention, and which participants or aspects of the scene are foregrounded). For instance, a single transfer event, such as handing over a book, can be encoded as *She gave him a book*, *He received a book*, or *A book was passed between them*. Each construction highlights different participants or perspectives, reflecting differences in attentional focus and figure–ground organisation, rather than contrasts with other expressions. In this framework, meaning is positively determined by the form's correlation with perceptual and conceptual patterns of attention, rather than emerging from systemic differences between forms. Langacker's model therefore preserves a relational view of meaning – how different construals relate to aspects of the conceptualised scene – without appealing to Saussurean contrast. The relationality is cognitive and perspectival rather than structural.

This emphasis on perspectival variation in Langacker's model finds a complementary expression in discourse-oriented approaches to metaphor, where figurative meaning-making is understood as a dynamic framing process. In this view, metaphorical interpretations emerge from how speakers selectively highlight aspects of conceptual structures in context, generating patterns that evolve through usage, accumulate cultural significance, and become embedded in discourse. Rather than depending on systemic contrast between signs, the coherence and resonance of discourse metaphors arise from their fit within broader semiotic and communicative patterns, including recurring figurative conventions, pragmatic expectations, and culturally shared knowledge. This perspective highlights the continuity between individual construal and community-level patterns of meaning, without assuming that discourse metaphors function analogously to Saussurean signs.

A further adaptation of Saussurean thought concerns the *langue–parole* distinction. Cognitive linguistics retains the insight that meaning involves both relatively stable and context-specific dimensions, but reconceptualises these in cognitive terms. Rather than treating langue as an abstract linguistic system and parole as its concrete execution, cognitive approaches to language reinterpret the distinction as one between experientially-grounded conceptual patterns shared within a community and language in use. Within this view, CMT captures the conventional level of conceptual organisation by identifying recurrent mappings, such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY, and their typical instantiations in language use (e.g., *He has his whole life ahead of him*). CBT (Fauconnier [1985] 1994; Fauconnier and Turner 2002) models the real-time use of conceptual structure: speakers blend elements drawn from stable, entrenched conceptual domains to create novel, context-sensitive interpretations. In this sense, blending can be seen as a parole-like process, operating

on the cognitive analogue of *langue* – the shared, conventionalised conceptual patterns – to generate meaning dynamically. Although blends are not reducible to metaphor, this process shows how conventional patterns may be selectively activated, combined, and reshaped in situated reasoning and discourse.

The next section examines how ECMT's multilevel analysis of metaphor offers a dynamic account that integrates insights into the organisation and construal of conceptual content, showing how figurative meaning is constructed online in relation to both embodied experience and culturally contingent knowledge. It bridges the langue-parole distinction by reframing it in cognitive terms, adopting a bottom-up perspective in which contextual meaning serves as the foundational level within a hierarchy of schematicity, activated in real time discourse.

4 Extended conceptual metaphor theory

Kövecses's (2020a, 2020b) ECMT offers a comprehensive framework for understanding figurative language, unifying the experiential grounding of CMT with a dynamic, context-sensitive approach to meaning-making informed by blending and discourse perspectives (as well as Saussurean structural insights as shown in the next section). Rather than treating conceptual metaphor as based on fixed mappings, ECMT conceptualises it as a dynamic phenomenon grounded in both entrenched structures stored in *long-term memory* and context-sensitive processes operating in *working memory*.

To build this perspective, ECMT brings together theoretical constructs from cognitive linguistics, namely, *image schemas* (e.g., Johnson 1987), *domains* (Langacker 1987), *frames* (e.g., Dancygier and Sweetser 2014; Sullivan 2013), and *mental spaces* (Fauconnier [1985] 1994, 2007). Image schemas operate at the most abstract level, organising experience in skeletal spatial terms; domains elaborate these schemas into meaningful wholes; frames elaborate specific content from domains; and mental spaces manipulate conceptual content in real-time discourse to serve speaker (i.e., contextual) meaning (see Evans 2013; Gibbs 2017; Zinken 2007).

Kövecses (2020a, 2020b) argues that in actual discourse metaphor is a bottom-up process unfolding as follows: a contextual metaphor activates a frame, which then activates the associated domain, ultimately drawing on the image-schema level mapping that provides the highest conceptual support. Each of these mapping levels takes place within a different context: *situational, discourse, cognitive-conceptual* and *embodied,* as demonstrated below by the analysis of the expression *I'm not going to let this illness win.*

1. The expression, *I'm not going to let this illness win,* emerges from a specific situational context: the speaker's ongoing experience of treatment and the practical and emotional difficulties it entails. In this context, the metaphor

constructs a local interpretation (or contextual meaning) of illness as a challenge to confront or deal with, framing the experience in terms of effort, resilience, and problem-solving. This situated construal is only one of several possible ways of conceptualising illness, including "journey", "burden", or "storm" (see Semino et al. 2018). This demonstrates that contextual metaphors are flexible and responsive to immediate discourse needs.

2. The contextual meaning activates frame-level metaphors such as ILLNESS IS ENGAGING IN BATTLE and ILLNESS IS ATTACK FROM A PHYSICAL AGENT. At this discourse level, the experience is structured through the "battle" or "attack" frame, providing culturally shared roles and scripts (e.g., fighter, opponent, defence, strategy, victory). These frames transform the experience into a socially recognisable narrative of confrontation and endurance, linking the speaker's personal stance to widely circulating cultural models of how illness is *supposed to be* experienced and talked about.

3. The above frame-level metaphors are supported by more schematic domain-level mappings that provide the conceptual foundations for reasoning about illness. Within the cognitive-conceptual context in question, illness is structured by a DIFFICULTY/ADVERSITY domain, which licenses the general mapping FACING DIFFICULTY IS ENGAGING IN A STRUGGLE. When recovery is conceptualised as successfully dealing with this adversity, a further entrenched mapping, OVER-COMING DIFFICULTY IS ACHIEVING SUCCESS/VICTORY, is activated, supporting the basic inferential logic (i.e., effort, resistance, progress, and possible success) underlying the "battle" or "attack" frame.

4. The above conceptual mappings are further supported by the image schematic metaphor STRUGGLE IS FORCE, which, in the context of illness, encodes bodily experiences of exertion, resistance, and compulsion. By mapping the abstract experience of battling with illness onto the dynamics of physical force, this metaphor renders the battle with illness concrete, emotionally resonant, and personally meaningful, linking the physical and affective dimensions of suffering to the cognitive and cultural dimensions of metaphorical understanding.

Table 1 (to be read bottom-up) demonstrates the process through which a metaphorical expression like *I'm not going to let this illness win* becomes a meaningful, situated act of communication.

In light of the above, ECMT extends CMT by situating metaphor within dynamic semiotic processes that address the tension between embodied motivation and culturally-shaped variation. It does so by systematically accounting for the interplay between conventionalised conceptual patterns and online meaning construction in real discourse. The next section interprets the contribution of ECMT as based on reframing Saussure's structural semiotic model in cognitive terms.

Table 1: Contextual factors and mappings at work in the interpretation of *I'm not going to let this illness win* from the perspective of ECMT.

Context type	Function in metaphor activation	Example in speaker's story	Conceptual metaphors activated
Embodied	Grounds the metaphor in bodily experience, making both physical and emotional aspects of illness meaningful and tangible	The speaker's physical suffering and emotional effort to persist in treatment	*Image schema level metaphor:* – STRUGGLE IS FORCE
Cognitive-conceptual	Activates culturally shared conceptual mappings, providing the broader framework from which frames are derived	Surviving illness as achieving victory	*Domain level metaphors:* – FACING DIFFICULTY IS ENGAGING IN A STRUGGLE – OVERCOMING DIFFICULTY IS ACHIEVING SUCCESS/VICTORY
Discourse	Organises the speaker's experience into a narrative scenarios, assigning concrete roles and actions	Illness as the enemy, patient as the fighter, treatment as the strategy	*Frame level metaphors:* – ILLNESS IS ENGAGING IN BATTLE – ILLNESS IS ATTACK FROM A PHYSICAL AGENT
Situational	Triggers a specific metaphorical meaning based on the speaker's immediate experience	Utterance: *I'm not going to let this disease win*	*Contextual meaning:* CONFRONTING ILLNESS IS A CHALLENGE

5 Saussure in extended conceptual metaphor theory

The extent to which ECMT may be viewed as a dynamic cognitive-semiotic model with roots in Saussure can be seen in its emphasis on:

1. Clarifying the relation between embodied motivation and variability in metaphor. ECMT reframes the issue not as a choice between experientialism and arbitrariness, but as the dynamic interplay between embodied motivation and flexible adaptation to cultural and situational variation.

2. Depicting metaphorical concepts as deriving their meanings from both horizontal cross-domain mappings, which relate concepts across different domains, and vertical hierarchical associations, which connect these mappings to culturally shared and embodied conceptual structures.

3. Reframing the *langue-parole* distinction in cognitive terms by explaining how socially shared metaphorical patterns become entrenched as conceptual structures in long-term memory, while discourse involves their online activation and adaptation in working memory.

5.1 Clarifying the relationship between embodied motivation and cultural variability

As shown above, Saussure's structural semiotic model views meaning as a product of arbitrary linguistic conventions, rather than intrinsic connections between signifier and signified. In contrast, CMT treats metaphor as grounded in shared bodily and sensory-motor experience, showing conceptual mappings to be experientially motivated. ECMT directly addresses and resolves this tension by retaining the experiential foundation of CMT while reintroducing a Saussurean sense of arbitrariness as flexibility. Metaphors are thus motivated yet adaptable. This adaptability is realised online in discourse, where speakers actively select and adjust metaphorical patterns in context. Over time, such situated uses can reinforce, modify, or even challenge entrenched metaphorical structures, linking real-time meaning construction with longer-term cultural and historical shaping.

This point can be demonstrated by the historical evolution of TIME metaphors within English itself. In their diachronic study of English metaphors for time, Konnova and Babenko (2019) show that dominant source concepts for time have shifted markedly over the centuries in response to broader sociocultural transformations. From the 12th to the 19th century, the conceptualisation of time through religious metaphors, such as TIME IS GOD'S CREATION and TIME IS GOD'S GIFT, gained increasing prominence, grounding temporal experience in spiritual ontology and aligning it with the concept of ETERNITY. These metaphors, structured around a divine giver, positioned TIME as sacred and morally significant.

However, with the gradual decline of the theocentric worldview and the rise of capitalist modernity in the 18th century, metaphors like TIME IS A COMMODITY, TIME IS MONEY, and TIME IS A RESOURCE gained primacy, shifting the conceptual frame from divine possession to human ownership and economic value. This transition reflects not only changing value systems but a reorientation from the sacred to the material, from eternity to productivity.

Clausner and Croft (1997, p. 249) describe the mapping from MONEY to TIME as "a conventional and culturally-specific knowledge structure possessed by English speakers". Although this mapping is often associated with Western capitalist

societies, the conceptualisation of time as a valuable and exchangeable entity is not unique to them. Ethnographic evidence from pre-capitalist cultures (e.g., Bourdieu's (1990) analysis of Kabyle society) shows that time could also function as a socially regulated resource, though embedded in different value systems and forms of exchange.

More recently, with the rise of digital technologies, the knowledge structure TIME IS A VIRTUAL ENTITY has gained acceptance in the English culture and beyond, portraying time as hyper-fast, disembodied, and disconnected from natural rhythms – a negotiated interpretation shaped by the temporal logic of the digital age (Konnova and Babenko 2019). Examples include expressions such as *losing hours to endless scrolling*, *a day slipping away in the feed*, or *time being glitched by constant notifications*, illustrating how digital contexts are reshaping our experience and understanding of time.

The above examples demonstrate, in line with ECMT, that metaphor is neither solely determined by universal embodied experience nor freely arbitrary. While conceptual metaphors vary across cultures and historical periods, speakers have the flexibility to select among alternative mappings, guided by the values, practices, and socio-cognitive models that structure experience within a given community or situational context. In this sense, experiential grounding and cultural motivation operate together: bodily experience provides a recurrent conceptual foundation, while cultural, historical, and contextual factors shape how that experience is interpreted, adapted, and conventionalised in discourse, allowing for situated variation and creative deployment of metaphorical meaning.

5.2 Relationality: horizontal versus vertical associations

ECMT (Kövecses 2020a, 2020b, 2024) extends Saussure's notion of *relationality* to the study of conceptual metaphor, showing that metaphorical meaning emerges not solely from embodied experience, but from how conceptual domains are relationally structured and interpreted within specific situated, cultural, and cognitive contexts. On this model, a figurative contextual meaning is to be understood as operating along two axes: horizontally through source-target associations, and vertically through conventional, socially specific frames and domains, and ultimately to universal image schematic concepts and/or structures.

This layered relationality perspective can provide a comprehensive analysis of conceptual networks underlying divergent worldviews expressed by metaphorical expressions. For example, English speakers typically say, *save time, buy time, spend*

time but they may reference the Chinese proverb *An inch of time is an inch of gold, but you can't buy that inch of time with an inch of gold* [1] – a pre-capitalist proverb that reflects a Confucian moral–philosophical value system.

Both the English expressions and the Chinese proverb can be seen as instantiations of the domain level metaphor TIME IS A VALUABLE COMMODITY, which structures our understanding of time as a finite, valuable resource (i.e., something that can be spent, traded, saved, or lost). However, the English expressions and the Chinese proverb reflect different framings of the metaphor in question by horizontally relating TIME to different concepts (i.e., MONEY versus GOLD) – framings that in turn provide access to different metaphorical conceptual pathways and schematicity hierarchies (see Kövecses 2020a, 2024).

The frame level metaphor TIME IS MONEY, deeply embedded in economic and labour-based reasoning, transforms temporal experience into financial logic, where time becomes a common, fungible resource that is measurable, interchangeable, and instrumental. This reinforces a moral imperative to use time in the service of output and gain. Accordingly, deadlines, schedules, and time management become central to the way time is perceived and expressed in real discourse, as the following examples demonstrate: *I've cleared my afternoon to work on this, We've packed a lot into the morning, Try to fit that into your schedule,* and *The week is already loaded with meetings.*

This frame-domain pairing underlying the conceptualisation of TIME in terms of MONEY is supported by a set of conceptual structures at the image schema level, as follows (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999, pp. 139–53):
– TIME IS A SUBSTANCE, where time is divisible and quantifiable.
– TIME IS A BOUNDED CONTAINER, where time is conceptualised as a limited temporal space into which tasks can be placed.
– TIME IS A BALANCING ACT, where time gained or lost is weighed against outcomes or productivity, as in *Time well spent* and *He wasted no time, but gained little.*
– PATH-GOAL, which offers a dynamic structure for understanding time as a linear progression towards goals (productivity, achievement, or measurable success). This is reflected in expressions like *I'm on track to meet the deadline, We're making progress on the project,* and *He has a long way to go before retirement.*

As for TIME IS GOLD, the metaphor intensifies the commodity-based conceptualisation of time by presenting it as a precious, irreplaceable resource, whose

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1 The proverb is quoted from Huang (2023). 10 Chinese proverbs that can change your life. https://mandarinhq.com/2023/08/chinese-proverbs-4/.

loss cannot be fully recovered or compensated, as reflected in the proverb *An inch of time is an inch of gold, but you can't buy that inch of time with an inch of gold.* The metaphor draws on SUBSTANCE and CONTAINER image schemas, representing time as a quantifiable resource, but its emphasis is on non-fungibility and irreversibility, highlighting the moral and emotional value of time rather than merely its instrumental utility. This engages the BALANCE schema, signalling that time should be cherished and carefully allocated. While goal-oriented inferences, such as using time efficiently, can arise, they are secondary to the core focus on time's preciousness and irreplaceable nature. This frames the temporal path as a fleeting arc of experience rather than simply a means to an end.

Thus, while both TIME IS MONEY and TIME IS GOLD frame time as a valuable commodity, the use of one metaphor or the other can shape how people think and act with respect to time (see Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2011). Specifically, TIME IS MONEY emphasises exchange, efficiency, and productivity, whereas TIME IS GOLD emphasises irreplaceability, value, and loss. These metaphors as different frames of TIME IS A COMMODITY that result from connecting TIME to different source concepts (horizontal relationality) instantiate different schematic hierarchies and activate distinct reasoning pathways, as shown in Table 2.

The metaphors TIME IS A FUNGIBLE RESOURCE and TIME IS A SCARCE RESOURCE in Table 2 reflect how the TIME IS A COMMODITY METAPHOR is realised

Table 2: Schematicity hierarchies for TIME IS MONEY and TIME IS GOLD.

Image schema level metaphors	TIME IS A SUBSTANCE; TIME IS SCHEDULED TASKS WITHIN A BOUNDED CONTAINER; TIME IS A BALANCING ACT (COST VS RETURN); PATH-GOAL+TIME IS MOTION ALONG A PATH TOWARDS PRODUCTIVITY AND OUTCOME	TIME IS A SUBSTANCE; TIME IS PRECIOUS MOMENTS WITHIN A BOUNDED CONTAINER; TIME IS A BALANCING ACT (EXISTENCE VS LOSS); PATH +TIME IS MOTION ALONG A PATH TOWARDS INEVITABLE, IRREPLACEABLE LOSS
Domain level metaphors	TIME IS A COMMODITY TIME IS A FUNGIBLE RESOURCE	TIME IS A COMMODITY TIME IS A SCARCE RESOURCE
Frame level metaphors	TIME IS MONEY	TIME IS GOLD
Possible contextual meanings	TIME AS EFFICIENCY/UTILITY/OUTPUT/ SUCCESS (e.g., *Investing/Wasting time*)	TIME AS RARITY/MORTALITY/SACREDNESS (e.g., *Cherish every moment, Time waits for no one, Give someone your time*)

in the contexts of TIME IS MONEY and TIME IS GOLD. TIME IS A FUNGIBLE RESOURCE highlights that time, like other valuable resources, can be allocated, exchanged, or spent across activities, whereas TIME IS A SCARCE RESOURCE emphasises time's precious, irreplaceable nature and the emotional and practical significance of its loss. The examples in the table make the point.

It is worthwhile noting at this point that, in ECMT, the horizontal relation between concepts is not unidirectional (from concrete to abstract), which is the case in CMT, but reciprocal and dynamic. Take as an example SMELL in conventional metaphors like SUSPICION IS SMELL (e.g., *I can smell trouble*), BAD IS SMELLY (*I smell a rat*), and GENERAL ATMOSPHERE IS SMELL (*That smells of fraud*). Kövecses (2020a, pp. 29–33) demonstrated that SMELL becomes metaphorically productive as a source domain because of its relational positioning within a culturally meaningful network of oppositions: clean/dirty, fragrant/foul, trustworthy/dubious. At the same time, unlike visually salient properties such as colour, SMELL lacks obvious perceptual anchors, allowing it to be metaphorically constructed as a target domain. This is theoretically surprising, since source domains are typically thought to be ontologically richer than the abstract concepts they structure. Kövecses (2020a) resolves this paradox through a domain-matrix view, drawing on Langacker's (1987) notion of conceptual dimensions. He shows that concepts like SMELL are not monolithic but are composed of multiple, image schematic conceptual dimensions, such as EXISTENCE, INTENSITY, and LACK OF CONTROL, which are generic, abstract, and shared across both concrete and abstract domains. For example, in expressions like *The air was filled with a musty smell* or *The skunk gave off an unpleasant smell*, smell is conceptualised as a SUBSTANCE, the air or room as a CONTAINER, and the act of emitting as TRANSFER. These structuring schemas are not unique to SMELL but recur across the conceptual system. They are what allow SMELL to be construed figuratively as a target domain when those dimensions are profiled metaphorically.

This leads to a broader insight: no concept is entirely ontological or entirely figurative. Instead, each concept comprises both an embodied content ontology and a figurative construal, with one or the other becoming foregrounded depending on context. In conceptual metaphors, source domains tend to foreground their ontological substance, while target domains foreground their construal. Yet, this distinction is not absolute. The same concept (e.g., SMELL) can shift roles depending on whether its ontological or figurative dimensions are activated.

The relational model in ECMT, cognitively parallel to Saussure's syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, shows that metaphorical meaning arises from the interaction of contextual factors with conceptual structure along both horizontal (cross-domain) and vertical (hierarchical) dimensions. Selecting a particular source–target association in context activates distinct horizontal mappings and vertical
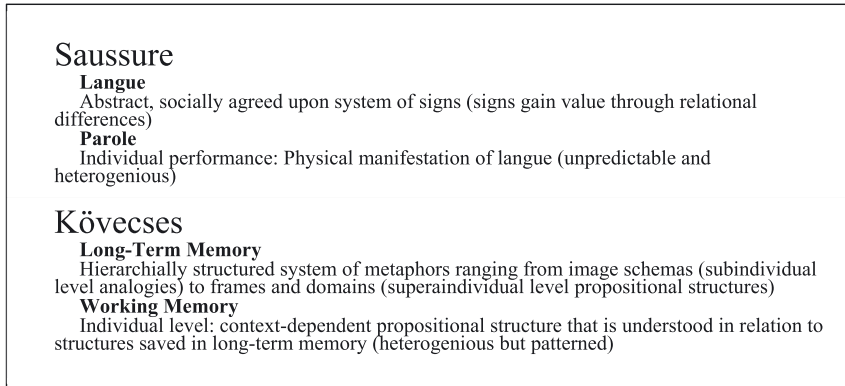
schematicity relations, which in turn shape the contextual meaning a metaphorical expression can realise.

5.3 Reframing the langue-parole distinction in cognitive terms

ECMT, with its dual emphasis on stable metaphorical systems and dynamic contextual instantiations, provides a cognitive-semiotic reinterpretation of the Saussurean *langue-parole* distinction. Instead of treating *langue* as an abstract code, ECMT emphasises shared, entrenched conceptual patterns that are stored in long-term memory. These patterns include image schematic concepts and metaphors which emerge from embodied experience at the *subindividual level*. Below these sit more complex metaphorical domains and culturally specific frames. Frames and domains operate at the *supraindividual level*, representing collectively held propositional structures that are embedded in discourse, institutions, and cultural practice. This networked structure is dynamic but stable, and it shapes the shared conceptual toolkit from which individual speakers draw. At the *individual level* – the level of parole – ECMT does not merely focus on performance but on the real-time semiotic activity through which speakers construct meaning. Drawing on working-memory processes such as mental space building and blending, speakers selectively activate entrenched metaphors and adapt them to the current discourse situation. Here, speakers engage with metaphor not as fixed formulae but as flexible, patterned resources for meaning-making (Kövecses 2015, 2020b, pp. 120–121). A speaker may say, for instance, *We're circling the main issue*, invoking a spatial or motion-based metaphor for conversational progress. This utterance is contextually specific, but it is understood in relation to underlying conceptual mappings stored in long-term memory. These mappings are heterogeneous, shaped by individual experience, genre, and discourse context, but they are also patterned, constrained by the structured metaphorical system shared across a speech community. In this way, working memory processes interact dynamically with the embodied, enduring structures of metaphorical cognition, bringing long-term patterns to life in response to immediate communicative needs.

Thus, by accounting for both the system-level organisation of metaphors and their concrete, context-bound enactment, ECMT preserves the langue-parole distinction while reframing it as a dynamic interaction between stored cognitive patterns and socially mediated, online meaning construction, as represented by Figure 1.

Saussure

Langue
Abstract, socially agreed upon system of signs (signs gain value through relational differences)
Parole
Individual performance: Physical manifestation of langue (unpredictable and heterogenious)

Kövecses

Long-Term Memory
Hierarchially structured system of metaphors ranging from image schemas (subindividual level analogies) to frames and domains (superaindividual level propositional structures)
Working Memory
Individual level: context-dependent propositional structure that is understood in relation to structures saved in long-term memory (heterogenious but patterned)

Figure 1: ECMT's cognitive reframing of Saussure's langue-parole distinction.

6 Conclusions

The central contribution of this study lies in its examination of ECMT through a Saussurean lens. It shows that ECMT extends CMT by offering a dynamic cognitive–semiotic account of metaphor that captures both the organisational stability of entrenched conceptual patterns and their context-sensitive enactment in discourse. In doing so, ECMT addresses longstanding tensions in metaphor theory – most notably the relationship between embodied motivation and discourse-driven cultural variation, demonstrating that these are not opposing forces, but interdependent dimensions in the shaping of metaphorical meaning. ECMT therefore reconceptualises figurative meaning as motivated by bodily experience yet not predetermined, remaining open to contextual and culturally shaped variation – thus retaining a role for a *Saussurean* principle of *arbitrariness*, but at the level of selection and interpretation, rather than at the level of conceptual grounding.

ECMT further challenges a core assumption of early CMT: that metaphorical structuring predominantly involves mappings from concrete to abstract domains. It shows instead that the relation between domains is reciprocal and dynamic: metaphors can emerge from socially shared conceptual models that reshape and elaborate entrenched conceptual structures over time. This reflects a more flexible view of conceptual organisation, in which embodiment provides motivation, but cultural practices and discourse guide conceptual development and adaptation.

Viewed through this lens, ECMT reanimates Saussure's semiotic model in a contemporary cognitive framework. Whereas Saussure located meaning in the relational organisation of linguistic signs along syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, ECMT demonstrates that metaphorical meaning likewise arises from structured

relational networks: horizontal associations across domains and vertical links across levels of schematicity. Crucially, these relations are dynamic rather than fixed: they are continually activated, negotiated, and reshaped through use, context, and cultural transmission.

In this way, ECMT offers a cognitive reinterpretation of the *langue–parole* distinction. It distinguishes between shared, relatively stable conceptual repertoires that speakers draw on (a cognitive–cultural analogue of *langue*) and the online, adaptive construction of meaning in discourse (a rethinking of *parole*). Metaphor, on this account, is not a static mapping but a living semiotic system through which mind, culture, and communication interact in the ongoing creation and transformation of meaning.

Future research could focus on empirically tracing how metaphorical mappings shift and interact across the ECMT hierarchy in real discourse. Using corpus-based, multimodal, or psycholinguistic methods, such studies could investigate how image-schematic, domain level, and frame level structures are activated or suppressed in different communicative settings, and how these shifts reflect degrees of arbitrariness or embodiment in metaphor use.

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