

Semiotic trees and maximalist conceptualization: olive trees as conceptual anchors in antimafia communities

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Context – This talk is part of a project about civil Italian antimafia discourse, in which we move away from decontextualized speaking for thinking, and examine the ongoing elaboration of concepts in a material world at the interface of multimodal language (talk and co-speech gesture) and praxis. Surprisingly, the language of antimafia practice, which breaks the law of silence imposed by a criminal organization on a territory, has remained largely unexplored from a socio-cognitive perspective, a gap we cover with embedded ethnographic field research in communities undergoing criminal intimidation. **Objectives** – We operationalize cognitive linguistic concepts about container and body schemata, deictic vectors, proximization and multimodal viewpoints. The specific goal of the talk is to unveil complex culture-specific spatio-temporal meanings for trees in the civil antimafia movement in (Southern) Italy. Contrary to a post-Saussurean perspective about trees as decontextualized signifiers abstracted from concrete usage-events, we study the complex conceptual networks these trees reveal as maximally instantiated material anchors in the embodied usage events of an agri-cultural cognitive ecology. As a result, we are able to provide insights in trees as as cultural concepts in settings where mafia and antimafia actors alternatively occupy the territory, fully embedding such concepts in the spatial settings of olive yards, taking into account conceptual viewpoints of insiders and outsiders (criminal or not) which have access to the field.

Theoretical tenets – Our research, rooted in postfoundational discourse theory after Gramsci (Jessop 2020), combines three theoretical dimensions proper to cognitive grammar (Langacker 2008a/b, 2014, 2020) and proximization theory (Cap 2021, Chilton 2014) which allow to describe the material anchor tree under study: (1) represented time in usage events as a series of windows of attention (discourse spaces), inspired by Langacker's CDS model, (2) semiotic channels of speech and co-speech gesture for deictically pointing at and iconically profiling relevant conceptual things and relations in the material yard, (3) the partitioning of deictic spatial settings, in which participants in the (intersubjective) ground are conceived as in/out self/other actors in an orchard seen as a container schema.

Data – Our analysis is based on extensive embedded and participatory field research in different parts of Italy. This talk scrutinized 3 hours of video recordings, during which we interviewed activists and workers in so-called seized mafia assets, in this case olive yards which were given back to the civil society after antimafia trials, and in which activists organize official labour and socio-educational activities under ongoing mafia treats.

(Expected) results – We provide a conceptual template for understanding the at first sight natural context of the olive yard as a conceptual domain for concrete work and symbolic counterhegemonic Italian meaning construction. More specifically we provide (1) a typology for olive trees as material anchors undergoing (anti)mafia action, (2) conceptual insights in visual-material configurations in the olive yard, involving access roads, fences and visual overviews, (3) viewpoint arrangements for past and ongoing encounters between mafia and antimafia actors on the conceptual and material ground of the seized mafia asset.

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