

## CONCEPTUAL RE-CONTEXTUALIZATIONS AND RE-(RE-)-CONTEXTUALIZATIONS: THE STORY OF ‘SGLOBKA’

Nelly Tincheva

*Sofia University ‘St. Kliment Ohridski’, Bulgaria*

**Abstract:** ‘Sglobka’ is a word that entered abruptly Bulgarian political discourse in 2023. Before that, ‘sglobka’ had existed only as a technical term designating the manner of conjoining wooden or metal components. Within hours of its first public appearance in reference to the then Bulgarian government, ‘sglobka’ went viral. It even became the 2023 Bulgarian Word-of-the-year runner-up.

The main argument underlying this investigation sees the transition of SGLOBKA from the domain of technical discourse to the domain of political discourse as a process of cognitive re-contextualization. The theoretical framework of the investigation is that of Cultural Linguistics, harmonized with cognitive-sociolinguistic research techniques. The paper first establishes how the concept of SGLOBKA came to be re-contextualized against the political domain through its mediatized uses. Then the paper presents the results from a questionnaire-based study revealing how SGLOBKA is conceptualized by Bulgarians at the present stage of the concept’s evolution. The paper also reports on a probe revealing how SGLOBKA is conceptualized by certain UK political actors.

**Keywords:** *political discourse, conceptualization, cognitive sociolinguistics, Word of the year*

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**About the author:** Nelly Tincheva, DSc, is a Professor in Cognitive Linguistics and Discourse Analysis at the Department of British and American Studies, Sofia University ‘St. Kliment Ohridski’. She lectures in Text and Cognition, Discourse Analysis, Political Discourse, and Research Methods. Her research and publications are primarily associated with Cognitive Sociolinguistics, (Multimedia) Text Analysis, and Pragmatics.

**e-mail:** [tincheva@uni-sofia.bg](mailto:tincheva@uni-sofia.bg)

**ORCID iD:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7383-5939>

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## Introduction

In June 2023, a new word entered Bulgarian political discourse: *sglobka* (in Cyrillic, *сглобка*). Within hours of its first public appearance, *sglobka* was all over the media, social media included. In a few months, it became the 2023 Bulgarian Word-of-the-year runner-up. Before that, however, *sglobka* had existed only as a technical term: it designated either the manner of conjoining wooden or metal components, or the place where wooden or metal components are conjoined in a movable or in a fixed connection ('*sglobka*', n.d.).

The main argument underlying the investigation reported here is that the transition of *sglobka* from the domain of technical discourse to the domain of political discourse can be seen as a process of cognitive re-contextualization. This paper explores how the process occurs as well as what the conceptual specificities of the process are. The research questions addressed are the following:

1. How did SGLOBKA come to be re-contextualized cognitively through its initial mediatized uses?
2. How is SGLOBKA conceptualized by Bulgarians nowadays?
3. How is SGLOBKA conceptualized nowadays by political actors outside Bulgaria (e.g. in the UK)?

As these research questions associate with principles of conceptualization and with socio-political cultural specificities, the theoretical approach adopted here is that of Cultural Linguistics, which is harmonized with cognitive-sociolinguistic research techniques. Sections 2 and 3 below discuss why and how those two specifically are harmonized.

## Theoretical background

The investigation reported here is positioned against the general theoretical background of Cultural Linguistics (Sharifian, 2011, 2017), which draws heavily on Cognitive Linguistics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Langacker, 2001, 2008) and overlaps with Cognitive Sociolinguistics (Geeraerts et al., 2010; Hollmann, 2017; Kristiansen et al., 2022). One of the many precepts Cultural Linguistics inherits from Cognitive Linguistics, a precept central to our investigation, is that language is not only a form of cognition but language uses are (relatively) tangible access points to underlying cognitive processes. Accordingly, the word *sglobka* is seen here as such an access point to how people interpret a concept related to the domain of POLITICS, namely GOVERNMENT. In its turn, the concept of SGLOBKA is approached here as a cultural category, i.e., as a cognitive representation of an object, an event, or a mental state (Sharifian, 2017), which exists as a cognitive structure (e.g. a schema or a conceptual metaphor) (*ibid.*).

Any such cultural category, it needs to be highlighted, operates ‘in interaction’ with its current context (Polzenhagen et al., 2024).

‘Context’, however, represents a “frustrating” term (Givón, 2005) because “almost every encounter one has with context opens up to the slippery slope of relativity” (ibid., p. 14). Several points could still be formulated about the nature of the academic notion of ‘context’. The first one is that it originated as ‘context of culture’, when it was first introduced by anthropologist Malinowski (1923) and it was shortened to ‘context’ only later. In other words, the importance of cultural environments, evident in Malinowski’s phrasing, has been present since the very origin of the term ‘context’.

Halliday and Hasan (1985), too, speak of ‘cultural context’ and discuss it as ‘broader context’ in opposition to the ‘narrower’ option of ‘immediate-environment context’. The latter was the object of analysis in earlier linguistic studies (e.g. Firth, 1950; Hymes, 1964; Labov, 1972; Lewis, 1972), which aim to correlate immediate-environment parameters with the presence of certain linguistic features in a text (for a discussion see Tincheva, 2015). In similarity to Halliday and Hasan, Duranti and Goodwin (1992) treat context as either physical or social: ‘physical context’ is analogous to ‘immediate environment’, while ‘social context’ reaches beyond the current communicative situation. In principle, the distinction between the two types of context can be argued to represent variations in scope – as evident in Halliday and Hasan’s (1985) very use of the words ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’. Another generalization that could be made is that all of the above works treat context as a phenomenon existing objectively ‘out there’, i.e., a phenomenon not ontologically different from a real-life ‘communicative situation’, ‘environment’ or ‘setting’.

Alternatively, context could be seen as a cognitive phenomenon constructed by the human mind and subjectively representing, construing or simulating (see, e.g. Barsalou, 2006, 2023) an objectively existing communicative situation, environment or setting. Van Dijk (1979, p. 419), for instance, discusses ‘context spaces’ by which he means “the referential context focused upon by a speaker”. In his later research, van Dijk (1997) discusses those spaces as ‘context models’, which are cognitive in nature and which can additionally involve personal viewpoints, social attitudes, ideologies and cultural norms (van Dijk, 2009, 2014). Following Sharifian (2011), Cultural linguist and Conceptual Metaphor theorist Musolf (2016) also argues that contexts include socially shared knowledge, i.e., socially shared cognitive structures.

Here context is seen, first, as cognitive in nature and, more specifically, as a cognitive simulation of real-life experience. Second, context is seen as either ‘broad’ or ‘narrow’, but ‘broad’ and ‘narrow’ are approached as two end points on a scale and not as dichotomous types. Thus, through cognitive scope variation (term as in Barcelona, 2011), we could consider an IMMEDIATE

ENVIRONMENT to function as CONTEXT; we could also consider a TYPE OF DISCOURSE, or a DISCOURSE DOMAIN, to function as CONTEXT; and we could consider a whole CULTURE to function as CONTEXT to a language use. Section 4 below will discuss the real-life cultural context against which *sglobka* transitioned from the technical domain to the political domain. Section 5.1. will analyze the mediatized context against which SGLOBKA transitioned. Section 5.2. will provide data on how SGLOBKA is perceived nowadays against the general context of Bulgarian culture. Finally, Section 6 will provide cross-cultural data on how SGLOBKA is perceived nowadays against the context of UK political culture. Each section will be thus dedicated to a different context against which SGLOBKA is positioned. As the TECHNICAL DOMAIN was the only one against which SGLOBKA originally operated, each of the successive contexts against which SGLOBKA is studied here will be approached as an instance of re-contextualization.

The last point to note in this section concerns precisely the term ‘recontextualization’. So far, in the literature, the term has been typically used to indicate “the process whereby content that has been given expression in one context (to be known here as the “source” context) is subsequently reused and made manifest in a different context (to be termed the “destination” context)” (Connolly, 2014, p. 378). ‘Recontextualization’ has been predominantly used to indicate discursive and social processes, not cognitive ones. For example, Bernstein’s (1990) recontextualization deals with how texts can be re-used in pedagogical discourse. Linell’s (1998) version distinguishes Intratextual recontextualizations (which happen within the same text), Intertextual recontextualizations (which connect elements from different texts), and Interdiscursive recontextualizations (which move across different genres). Fairclough’s (2004) recontextualization is ‘a chain of genres’ and, arguably, resembles Linell’s Intertextual recontextualization (Gruber et al., 2023). It is Krzyżanowski’s (2016) recontextualization as ‘conceptual and discursive change’ that perhaps comes closest to the interpretation of the term adopted here but even it does not cohere with the cognitive and cultural linguistic premises adopted for our purposes, which are further discussed in the next section.

## Method

An issue, which makes our goal of tracing cultural re-contextualizations not as straightforward as it might seem, is that, with few exceptions, cognitive studies of language have supported the primacy of individual cognition over social cognition. Admittedly, there have been voices alerting researchers to the need for a change in that tendency. Cognitive linguist Langacker (1997, p. 376) emphasizes that “the dynamic nature of conceptual and grammatical structure leads us inexorably to the dynamics of discourse and social interaction”.

Geeraerts et al. (2010, p. 3) maintain that “meaning does not exist in isolation: it is created in and transmitted through the interaction of people”. Croft (2009, p. 395) suggests that “to be successful, cognitive linguistics must go ‘outside the head’ and incorporate a social-interactional perspective on the nature of language”. In Cultural Linguistics, Sharifian (2017) addresses the presence of distributed cultural cognition, which is now generally seen as “a set of implicit knowledge shared, negotiated, and re-negotiated by the members of a cultural community” (Baranyiné Kóczy & Brdar-Szabó, 2023, p. 261). The question we are faced with is what research techniques could be used to study such distributed structures of social and cultural cognition.

The answer could be found in research techniques employed in Cognitive Sociolinguistics (e.g. Pütz et al., 2014; Callies & Onysko, 2017; Benczes & Ságvári, 2018; Kristiansen et al., 2022). The approach studies how language users’ communicative competence is stored mentally and how this competence works during communication; it focuses on variation in cognitive processing models, perceptual dialectology, conceptual metaphor variation, etc. Importantly, Cognitive Sociolinguistics also studies cultural conceptualizations and their diversity (Baranyiné Kóczy & Brdar-Szabó, 2023).

This area of overlap between Cultural Linguistics and Cognitive Sociolinguistics makes it possible for us to harmonize quantitative sociolinguistic research techniques with cultural-linguistic premises. Our investigation will accord with cognitive studies such as Rosch’s (1973, 1975), which rely on numerical data obtained from real language users. Rosch’s experiments have demonstrated the compatibility of research on cognitive structures with research on socio-cultural factors (Lakoff, 2007). They also uphold the assumption that there exists socio-cultural and, consequently, statistically verifiable agreement among the members of a community about conceptual issues (Tinceva, 2023).

In sum, *sglobka* here is studied from the two overlapping viewpoints: first from the cultural-linguistic one and then from the cognitive-sociolinguistic one. Section 5.1. will approach SGLOBKA from a cultural-linguistic angle. Section 5.2. and Section 6 will provide data on SGLOBKA from a cognitive-sociolinguistic perspective. Hopefully, that will allow us a better, multi-faceted understanding of the re-contextualizations of the concept.

### **Political-discursive and rhetoric peculiarities of the initial re-contextualization**

In June 2023, Lena Borislavova (a member of Bulgaria’s *WE CONTINUE THE CHANGE* party) sent a text message to Desislava Atanasova (a member of Bulgaria’s *GERB* party). The latter later confirmed the exchange took place, although neither of the two actually made the text message public. The content

of the message concerned the rising tension between *WE CONTINUE THE CHANGE* and *GERB*, tension which then threatened the existence of the two parties' rotational government. In the text message, Borislavova used for the first time the word *sglobka* to refer to said rotational government and not to a technical entity. This use can be seen as the first instance of the concept (i.e., SGLOBKA) being re-contextualized. The instance could have remained just a one-off in a one-on-one exchange between colleagues and it could have remained outside Bulgarian cultural cognition.

But then, a third politician, Boyko Borissov, the *GERB* party leader, gave an impromptu interview in a Parliament corridor. In the absence of Borislavova and Atanasova, he shared with the media that:

*Lena Borislavova yesterday wrote a text message saying "We will break the assemblage". I have not made any assemblage and I will not participate in their assemblages.*

(translation mine; original: *Лена Бориславова вчера пише SMS-и "Ще счупим сглобката" Аз сглобка не съм правил и няма да участвам в сглобките им.*)

Presumably, Borisov's statement was intended to perform several discursive functions. First, through it, he demonstrated to both politicians and general public he was well-informed about everything in the Bulgarian political process. Second, he constructed himself as someone who had little to hide and who willingly allowed the general public a glimpse at the political backstage goings-on. Third, again presumably, Borisov was well aware that, in her text message, Lena Borislavova used the word *sglobka* in a way that was not discursively acceptable and, at best, was highly idiosyncratic. Thus, Borisov possibly implied Lena Borislavova did improper things (i.e. improper linguistically and otherwise) through writing that message and/or through writing it the way she did.

From a rhetoric perspective, in a classical rhetoric manner, Borisov used *sglobka* three times within a span of a 19-word utterance. Relying on three-part structures is a common rhetorical technique, and using it allowed Borisov to make sure Borislavova's 'wrong' use of the word was not be overlooked and that it stayed in people's minds. However, by doing so, perhaps unintentionally, he also started a process of normalization of the word's new sense by starting a process of the word's adjustment to a new – political-discursive – context. Thus, Borisov's making the a-typical use of *sglobka* public can be seen as the second instance when SGLOBKA became re-contextualized. Crucially, this time it was a public re-contextualization.

After Borisov mediatized the re-contextualization of the concept, the new way of using *sglobka* went viral: within 48 hours, *sglobka* appeared across all major media, social media included. It also inspired countless of memes, such as:



**Fig. 1.** A meme with the pseudo-villain character from the movie “Despicable me” (author: MemeTeamBg)

Cartoonists, too, joined by visualizing, i.e., framing (term as in Hart, 2023) the ongoing political situation. Since then, they have kept re-framing other political situations through the now-political notion of SGLOBKA, as in:



**Fig. 2.** A cartoon from the SEGA newspaper (author: Komarnitski)

In a meagre 6 months’ time, through its frequent mediatization, *sglobka* rose to occupy the runner-up position in the 2023 Bulgarian National Radio’s ‘Word of the Year’ list. It also brought about its own antonym – the newly-coined *разглобка* (literally, an UNDOING OF SLGOBKА) – to indicate A MECHANICAL OBJECT THAT IS (BEING) TAKEN APART.

At present, *sglobka* can be seen used on a daily basis across all kinds of media. As far as Boyko Borisov’s use of *sglobka* is concerned, any internet search will confirm his persistent and continued use of the word, especially when he discusses *WE CONTINUE THE CHANGE* and the party’s interactions with other political entities.

## Bulgarian re-contextualizations of SGLOBKA

### *SGLOBKA and its mediatized conceptualizations*

In the interview, in which Borisov used the word for the first time publicly, he focused on his desire for a coalition to be formed, and he clearly contrasted the meaning of *sglobka* to that of *coalition*. In this way, he framed SGLOBKA as an undesirable alternative, i.e., he presented it in a negative light. He also distanced himself from the SGLOBKA by excluding himself from it and by speaking of *their assemblages*. His intentional use of the plural *assemblages* further enhanced the perception of the word being used improperly, and served to imply Borisov's opinion of a *sglobka* as wrong on all levels. Thus, the word entered the public domain as expressing something wrong, out of place, vague, which makes people uncertain how to use it.

Since then, Borisov has kept imbuing the word with negative connotations. To use just one example, he also did so at the party's 2024 National Conference:

*You shouldn't call us 'an assemblage' anymore. I do not see in this word – 'assemblage' – anything rational, anything good for people.*

(translation mine; original: *Повече не трябва да ни наричате 'сглобка'. Не виждам в тази дума 'сглобка' нищо рационално, нищо добро за хората.*)

This negative attitude of his is very likely to have been shared by many Bulgarians, as a high percentage of the voting population were reported (Alpha research, 2022) not be enthusiastic about the existence of co-operation between *WE CONTINUE THE CHANGE* and *GERB*. Another high percentage of the population were not happy with the 'un-coalition' state of the relations between the two parties. I see that as a likely reason why Borisov's initial use of the word went viral at such a speed in the first days after his first interview mentioning it.

Another reason for the success of *sglobka* as a political catchword (apart from the negative connotations resonating with many) could be that *sglobka* expresses those general sentiments metaphorically, i.e. non-literally. Through SGLOBKA, the TWO PARTIES' CO-OPERATION is only interpreted as A MATERIAL, TECHNICAL ASSEMBLAGE. It is not indeed such an entity.

The persuasive power of metaphors being a well-explored topic (e.g. Charteris-Black, 2005, 2017; Hampl, 2012; Musolff, 2005, 2022; Romano, 2024), I do not intend to dwell on that here, but I feel I need to note that a COALITION/UN-COALITION is not conventionally thought of figuratively as PART OF A TOOL/A MECHANICAL ASSEMBLAGE. Instead, typically, we would conceptualize THE MODERN STATE AS A MACHINE/MECHANISM/APPARATUS (Anter, 2014), where THE WHOLE STATE – and just not a governing BODY

– is seen as a MECHANISM. In parallel, the BODY POLITIC metaphor (Lakoff, 1996; Musolff, 2021, 2022) sustains pervasive conceptualizations of THE (WHOLE) STATE AS A BODY. This metaphorization is the one typically dominating the construal of how a government operates (ibid.).

In brief, SGLOBKA as A MECHANICAL ASSEMBLAGE represents a new, unexpected figurative use, which has the potential to cohere with already existing figurativity in the domain but is not completely aligned with it, or, at least, not yet. As of today, SGLOBKA can be claimed to operate at a level of granularity (term as in Körner et al., 2023) which differs from that prescribed by the already existing metaphonymies (term as in Barcelona, 2011) in Bulgarian political discourse. In other words, a SGLOBKA is too small and too unattached a part of the state MACHINE, and the metaphorization seems to run against conventionalized knowledge of the importance of a GOVERNMENT as A DRIVING FORCE, or as a TOPMOST PART of the state MACHINE/MECHANISM.

That subconsciously operating cognitive discrepancy, I believe, adds to the negatively framed cognitive construal of what a SGLOBKA is and, importantly, these perceptions still persist. The next section is dedicated to this issue.

### ***SGLOBKA and its non-mediatized conceptualizations***

In tracing the socio-cognitive distribution of SGLOBKA at the collective level of cognition (see 3. above), I employ a sociolinguistic experiment technique, namely a questionnaire study, which involves 60 Bulgarian respondents. Clearly, conclusions drawn from a relatively limited population as this could not claim general validity; yet, the sample can allow us to establish whether there are any traceable tendencies that could be further studied in statistically-apt research or not.

The participants were divided into three age groups of 20 respondents each: those aged between 16 and 21 (i.e., those underaged), those between 21 and 35 (i.e., those considered young members of the population), and those aged 35+ (i.e., those considered mature members of the population). The purpose was to reflect existing generational differences. The division also allowed me to keep a 50:50 proportion between respondents with a higher degree of education and respondents without one.

The questionnaire included one open-ended question: ‘What do you understand by *sglobka*?’ Additional comments were also allowed.

The data obtained point to the following:

(a) Out of the 60 respondents:

- 49 reported they were not sure what exactly *sglobka* means;

- 8 commented that the non-literal *sglobka* use still feels ‘unnatural’ to them;
- 3 (aged between 22 and 25) reported they had never heard the word before;
- None of the under-aged participants appeared to be unaware of the existence and the meaning of the word.

(b) The conceptual features of SGLOBKA most frequently mentioned across the responses relate to:

- Something that is not permanent
- Something that is not well-fitted
- Something put together in a hurry
- Something temporary

(c) More rare descriptions characterize SGLOBKA as:

- Something consisting of parts that are incompatible
- Parts that are hooked together and not glued together
- Cold (to the touch)
- Clanky

The last two above can be argued to represent more sensory descriptions and seem to suggest a lesser degree of metaphorization due to the persisting salience of the metaphoric source domain.

Additional generalizations based on the data are:

- The responses in this questionnaire study are predominantly negative (a 16-year-old even defined SGLOBKA as ‘usurping power’).
- Roughly  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the answers are neutral. (One respondent commented hers was a neutral attitude to the realia, but she was fully aware that any connotations attached would be dependent on a user’s whole political worldview and their evaluation of the whole political situation.)
- 11 respondents (none of the under-age group) commented that, originally, they ‘felt’ anyone’s using *sglobka* was funny, or there was a funny aspect to it. At present, *sglobka* triggers in them feelings of awkwardness, negativity, and even fear.

In general, the study confirms the presence of a clear tendency for Bulgarians to conceptualize SGLOBKA negatively. More specifically, the pervasive cognitive cultural metaphorization controlling the use of *sglobka* proves to be that of

SGLOBKA as an ENTITY, which is NOT WELL-FITTED and can exist only TEMPORARILY. As the last bullet above suggests, at this stage of the concept's evolutions, SGLOBKA re-conceptualizations are already heterogeneously distributed across Bulgarian culture and they continue to evolve.

### **UK re-contextualizations of SGLOBKA**

This section turns to the possibility for yet another SGLOBKA re-contextualization to be in existence: it turns to the question whether there are any cross-cultural (i.e., non-Bulgarian) re-contextualizations of SGLOBKA. To account for that possibility, I tried and verified if and how *sglobka* has travelled to the UK political-discourse domain.

First, I verified which translation alternatives of *sglobka* are actually employed in English. The result was a somewhat surprising unanimity in translators' and interpreters' preference for *assemblage* in that respect. The 5 most frequently used sources for Bulgarian news in English (verified through Google and Yahoo searches) all reveal the same preference:

1. <https://kinsights.capital.bg/>
2. <https://sofiaglobe.com/>
3. <https://www.novinite.com/>
4. <https://www.bta.bg/en>
5. <https://bnr.bg/en/news/list>

Next, I organized a questionnaire probe involving 12 UK representatives of both public bodies and privately-held businesses, who communicated and cooperated regularly with Bulgarian politicians and diplomats. In their professional duties as Government officials in various departments and agencies as well as executives at non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), the UK respondents had to acquaint themselves with the word *assemblage* as a translation of *sglobka*. 3 of the respondents were aware of the existence of the word *sglobka*, although they never actively used it. 9 of the respondents only knew the translated version of *assemblage*.

The questionnaire was distributed via a key networked individual in London, who is a Bulgarian citizen and whose native language is Bulgarian. This networked questionnaire distribution was meant to ensure a (near)-random selection of participants. The individual in question did not participate in any fashion while the respondents answered the questions, nor did that person steer the respondents' answers in any direction.

The questionnaire included only one open-ended question: 'What do you understand by *sglobka*?' Additional comments were also allowed.

The data obtained point to the following:

(a) Out of the 12 respondents:

- All 12 reported they were not sure what exactly *assemblage* means within a political context;
- 5 mentioned their confusion between *assembly* and *assemblage*. They discussed their never being sure whether the word was a matter of bad translation/interpreting or not.

(b) The conceptual features of ASSEMBLAGE most frequently mentioned across the responses relate to:

- Something to do with the Bulgarian government
- Something well-fitted
- Something flexible

(c) The connotations reflected in the responses are predominantly neutral or positive.

In sum, the probe, however limited, confirms the presence of a tendency for UK political actors to conceptualize SGLOBKA non-negatively. In that, UK cultural conceptualizations of SGLOBKA differ significantly from Bulgarian ones. This tendency also confirms the presence of a re-contextualization of the concept that follows a different path than the concept's path in Bulgarian culture.

## Conclusion

This paper has traced how a (strictly technical) term can be metaphorized conceptually and can be thus re-contextualized within another (in this case, the political) domain.

The paper has discussed how the concept of SGLOBKA came to be re-contextualized against the political domain through its mediatised uses. Next, it has presented the results from a questionnaire-based study revealing how SGLOBKA is conceptualized by Bulgarians at this stage of the concept's evolution. It has also reported on a second questionnaire-based probe, which lifts the curtain on how SGLOBKA is interpreted by certain political actors in the UK.

In this way, the investigation presented here has traced several stages in the re-contextualization of SGLOBKA. In other words, it has traced several successive re-contextualizations and re-(re-)-contextualizations of the concept.

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