

THE ARTISTIC-EXPRESSIVE DIMENSION OF GYMNASTICS FOR ALL

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Abstract

The expressive and poetic dimension of Gymnastics for All (GfA) is often recognized in choreographies performed at gymnastics festivals, emphasising its communicative and referential function. The aim of this study was to discuss the artistic-expressive dimension of GfA based on Pierre Parlebas' theory and in the sociological notion of sportivisation. The particular and unfinished sportivisation of the GfA process includes the absence of institutionalised gesture codes, characterising the artistic-expressive dimension as a "potency", which therefore may or may not be part of GfA's activities, according to the decision of each group. This analysis allows us to distinguish GfA from other artistic sports, such as rhythmic gymnastics and figure skating, and from other art forms, such as dance and circus.

Keywords: *gymnastics, motor praxeology, artistic sports, sportivisation process.*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between sport and art constitutes an interesting concept, combining contributions from history, sociology, and philosophy. Recent studies have revived discussions about the artistic aspects of some sports, including artistic swimming, figure skating, rhythmic gymnastics and acrobatic gymnastics (Chiat & Ying, 2012; Leandro, Avila-Carvalho, Sierra-Palmeiro & Bobo-Arce, 2016; Manos & Popescu, 2014; 2020; Toledo & Antualpa, 2016). For all these competitive sports, the artistic-expressive dimension is controlled by criteria formally detailed in its

rules, in combination with coaches', choreographers', and referees' decisions.

However, different studies argue that the artistic-expressive dimension has particularities in the case of gymnastics for all (GfA). In that regard, the aim of this study was to analyse the artistic-expressive dimension of GfA based in the motor praxeology theory presented by the French sociologist Pierre Parlebas (2001) and the following discussions proposed by Mateu & Bortoleto (2011) concerning the expressive motor situation (EMS). In addition, the sociological notion of sportivisation was

used to locate the GfA in the *continuum* of expressive practices (Mateu, 2010).

GYMNASTICS FOR ALL IN THE PARLEBAS' PERSPECTIVE

According to the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG), GfA is a group gymnastics activity oriented to well-being, health, and leisure promotion (FIG, 2020). The GfA activities often result in choreographed programs (Carbinatto & Reis-Furtado, 2019) performed at gymnastics festivals (Patrício, Bortoleto, Carbinatto, 2016). Throughout its long history, GfA has consolidated an inclusive gymnastics practice with enormous technical and aesthetic diversity (Menegaldo & Bortoleto, 2020).

GfA and its purpose aimed at participation has been developed in several European countries since the 19th century, building the foundations of the FIG, as defended by one of its founders, the Belgian Nicholas Cuperus. Regarding other disciplines, i.e., artistic gymnastics and rhythmic gymnastics, also under the FIG governance, GfA has notable differences. Three of them are particularly interesting for our study:

a) the absence of a gestural codification – or a Code of Points – to guide the development of GfA. This fact results in the emergence of different group performances, changing the participants' profile (age group, gender, gymnastic skills), the number of group members and the technical level. Furthermore, the absence of regulations also allows different configurations regarding other elements that constitute its choreographies: the possibility of using apparatus, music, and even the use of themes for the development of these

performances (Almeida, 2016; Carbinatto & Reis-Furtado, 2019).

b) its non-competitive development, particularly when referring to a GfA groups' participation in gymnastics festivals for demonstrative purposes (Patrício, Carbinatto & Bortoleto, 2016). What interests us is, in addition to the non-competitive trait of the events, is the fact that the absence of an objective system to compare performances allows for an important diversity of choreographies that are developed by different groups (Carbinatto & Reis Furtado, 2019). Additionally, the motivations that guide people to do GfA differ substantially from those seen in competitive disciplines (Menegaldo, 2022; Patrício, 2022; Bortoleto, Heinen, Jun, Toledo, Schiavon, Pasqua, Oliveira & Menegaldo, 2019; Wichmann & Jarvis, 2015).

c) its sportivisation process. Because of the previously mentioned absence of rules and, therefore, the absence of evaluation criteria and of a regulation of technical issues, it is evident that the sportivisation process of GfA takes place differently from those seen in competitive disciplines, such as artistic gymnastics and rhythmic gymnastics (Silva, Menegaldo, Almeida & Bortoleto, 2021). Despite the institutional recognition by FIG and by several national gymnastics federations (Bento-Soares & Schiavon, 2020), the GfA sportivisation process is distinct, and may be considered unfinished (Menegaldo, 2022). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that this seems intentional from an institutional perspective, since the resistance to certain trends of a sportivisation process seems to be convenient to maintain diversity and inclusion in the GfA context.

In order to analyse those characteristics, a systemic perspective was

adopted to study the GfA “internal logic”. According to Parlebas (2001), every “motor situation” (sports, games) has a unique internal logic (Parlebas, 2021), made up of systemic relationships among four structural elements: space, participants, time and implements. Each of those elements are determined by rules or the social contracts established by the participants. This theory proposes a taxonomy system named CAI following three main criteria: a) presence (C) or absence (C) of teammates, b) presence (A) or absence (A) of opponents, and c) presence (I) or absence (I) of uncertainty regarding the space (practice performed in a stable or unstable facilities) (Figure 1). Combining these criteria, we have eight categories:

The GfA internal logic places it in the Sociomotor Situation (performed in group), without opponents, in a stable space (CAI). However, since the GfA practice has no rules (Code of Points), the number of participants in each group, the space used for performances and the use of implements are not pre-determined and all these aspects can be defined by each GfA group, according to their goals and possibilities. Theoretically, GfA may give rise to multiple internal logics (Figure 2) (Menegaldo & Bortoleto, 2020), based on different ways to set the systemic elements (participants, space, time and implement). Despite that, one major aspect never changes: GfA is a sociomotor situation with cooperation as its most relevant aspect

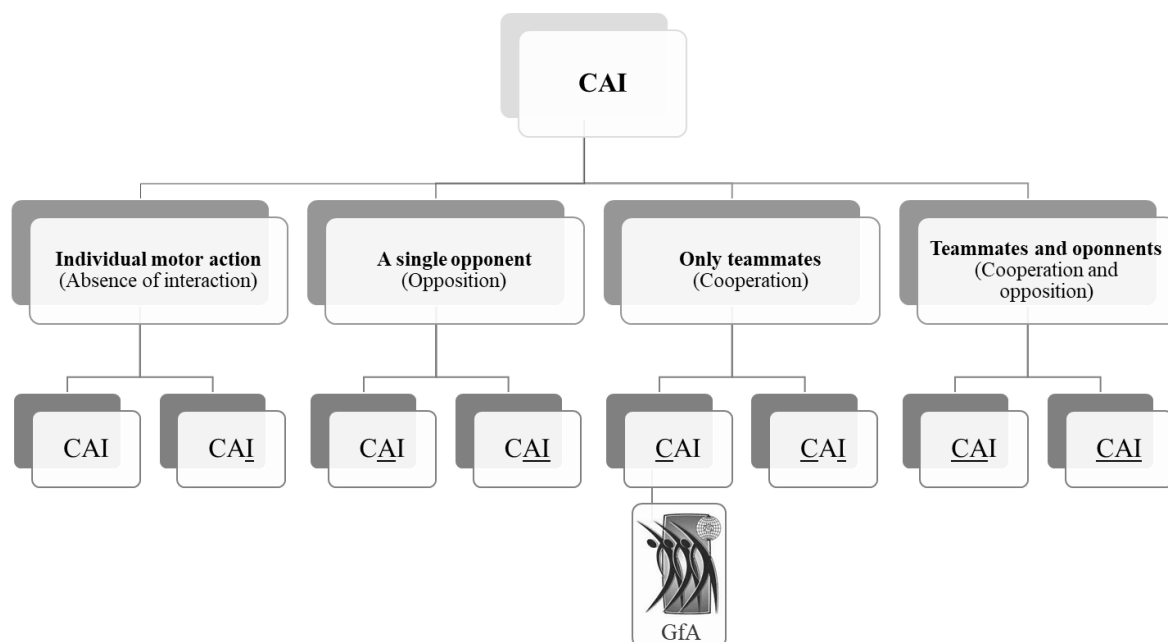


Figure 1. CAI Taxonomy.

Source: adapted from Parlebas (2001).

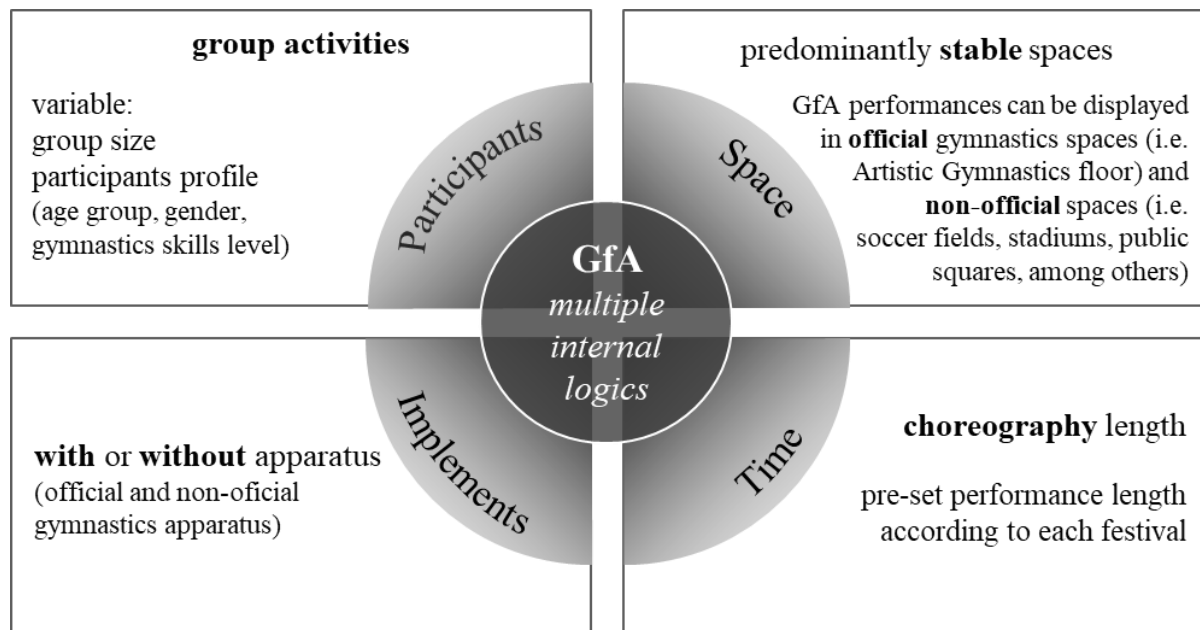


Figure 2. GfA multiple internal logics.
Source: created by the authors.

GYMNASTICS FOR ALL AS AN EXPRESSIVE SITUATION

Considering all this, we are particularly interested in the fact that, regardless of the way each group structures its internal logic, in most cases, GfA has the motor objective of showing its choreographic compositions, similar to some other artistic-expressive practices. Nevertheless, different from other sports identified as “artistic”, such as acrobatic gymnastics and artistic swimming, which all have expressive objectives orchestrated and conditioned to regulations and gestural patterns, GfA shows more similarities with artistic practices such as dance and circus (Mateu & Bortoleto, 2017), since it does not measure its artistic-expressive dimension on the basis of a set of regulations.

The GfA artistic-expressive dimension has been mentioned in recent studies and is always linked to its choreographic compositions analysis (Lopes, 2020; Carbinatto & Reis-Furtado, 2019;

Scarabelim & Toledo, 2016). Based on Mateu & Bortoleto (2011) proposal, GfA is an expressive motor situation (EMS), combining the motor (physical) and the expressive dimension, that is, a gymnastics activity that incorporates intentionally a poetic, communicative and referential function to its internal logic (Mateu, Garcías, Spadafora, Andrés, & Febrer, 2021; Mateu & Bortoleto, 2017). Therefore, when we attend a GfA festival, most of the performances that we see emerge as an aesthetic experience with deliberate poetic-communicative content.

The EMS includes situations in which motor skills become gestures, communicating messages (poetic function) and may even relate to a theme or any external reference (referential function). Thus, EMS covers a huge number of practices from spontaneous expression (play with toys alone in a room, i.e.) to a maximum codification (rhythmic gymnastics, i.e.) and are characterised by an expressive-communicative intention of

alterity (Mateu & Lavega, 2017). Nevertheless, not all motor situations have this artistic-expressive dimension. According to motor praxeology, this dimension needs to be intentional and constitute a central element in the operativity of internal logic. In Figure 3 below, it is possible to see the classification of motor situations (CAI) along with the artistic-expressive criteria (E).

As highlighted by Mateu & Bortoleto (2011), a determining characteristic of EMS is the absence of opponents, which makes four out of eight categories of CAI lack this expressive-communicative subdomain. The four remaining categories are those that may have an artistic-expressive motor objective: a) CAIE: corresponds to psychomotor situations characterised by the absence of a teammate (C) and/or an opponent (A) (there is no motor

interaction), as well as the absence of space uncertainty (for example, a mimicker, a dancer or a solo equilibrist); b) CAIE: psychomotor situations in which protagonists intervene individually, with no teammate (C) and/or opponent (A), but with uncertainty (I) of space to practice the activity (for example, solo dance performances in nature); c) CAIE: sociomotor situations (group practices) that only have teammates (C), without the presence of opponents (A) and that take place in a stable environment, with no uncertainty of space (I) (gymnastics for all); d) CAIE: sociomotor situations (group practices) that have only teammates (C), without the presence of opponents (A) and that take place at an unstable environment, with uncertainty of space (I) (for example, outdoor group dance or dance/climbing).

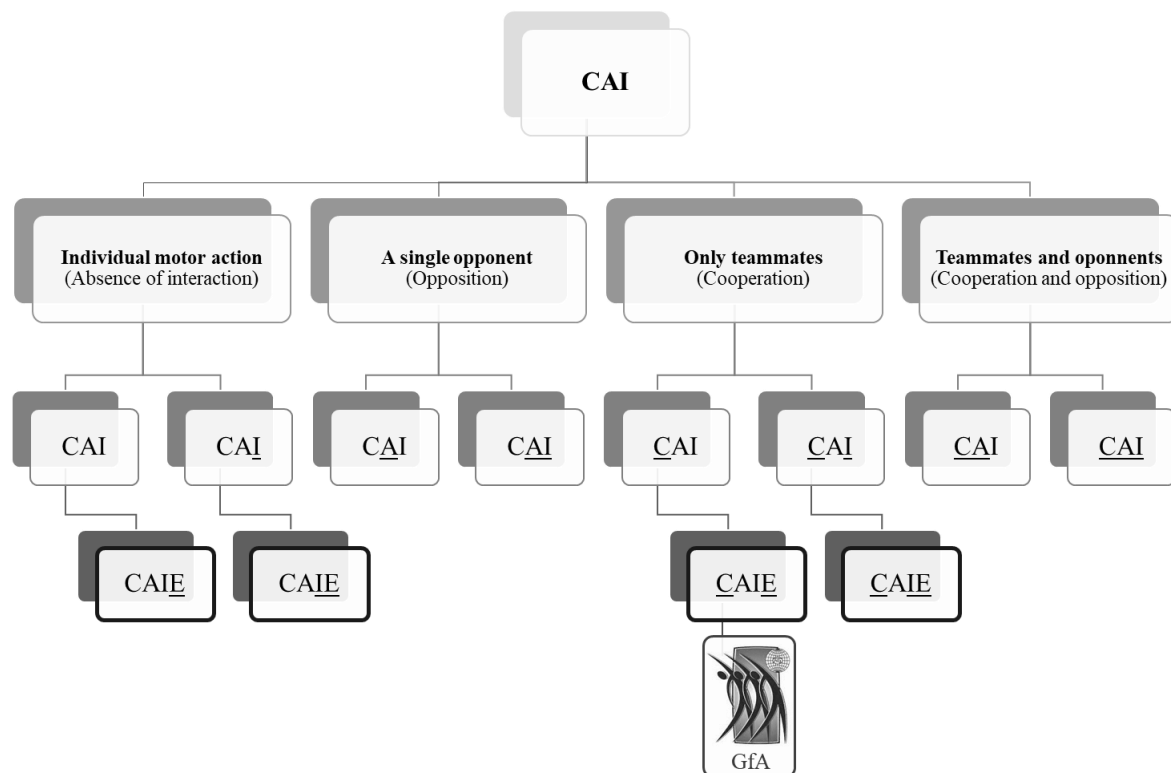


Figure 3. CAI Classification and subdomains of Expressive Motor Situations (EMS). Source: adapted from Parlebas (2001) and Mateu & Bortoleto (2011).

For all EMS it is the referential function that attributes sense to the systems. Thereby, this referential semiotic function models the objectives of these activities to beyond the concrete dimension (“matter”) of motor actions, incorporating a subjective layer to all systemic relations and providing them with singularity and expressive specificity. A single walk that can be seen in the return of a football player after taking a shot at goal has only a motor function (move the player from one place to another). Nevertheless, during a theatre performance, while observing an actor walking from one side to the other of the stage in a display of pain over the loss of a close relative, the same motor action is identified (movement in walking), but with a distinct intentionality on the part of the actor. The actor’s walk is intentionally expressive; it requires a complex interpretation for its execution, which must be perceived and interpreted by the audience.

Motor actions that comprise these two different ways of walking are deeply distinct and modelled by motor objectives that are also different. The first one has no referential function. The walk represents only a way of going from one place to another and, sometimes, resting while this happens. In the second one, an expressive load is intentionally added to this motor action thus transferring to the observer (the audience) the deep pain of losing a loved one. To enable the expression-communication of this walk, body language needs to build the sense of pain (the feeling of loss), even if, when observed, there are no guarantees of how it will be interpreted

by the spectator. The subjectivity that follows the actor’s walk requires a subjective interpretation by the audience.

Indeed, EMS is based on semiotricity¹, in this case of referential, poetic and expressive function (Mateu & Bortoleto, 2011, p. 138), not only instrumental function. This expressive dimension linked to semiotricity (Parlebas, 2001) occurs not only through the interaction among individuals during performance (in case of sociomotor situations), but also regarding the relationship with implements and space. Consequently, we may say that in EMS all the systemic organisation/internal logic (Parlebas, 2001) will be established based on the artistic-expressive dimension. Thus, GfA choreographies often intentionally attempt to “build” a scene, showing a story that moves it. Hence, GfA choreographies are commonly themed, combining music and other elements (such as, costumes, makeup and sometimes even scenery), in order to amplify the expression-communication of the theme/message through choreography (Almeida, 2016). GfA performances usually intend to convey a message or a meaning using bodies and movements, and this “communicative project” is designed for each choreography and affects all elements of internal logic.

In this sense, semiotricity is strongly related to the choreographies performed in different gymnastics festivals (Patrício, Bortoleto & Carbinatto, 2016; Wichmann, 2014; Meckbach & Lundquist Waneberg, 2011) and it represents an overlapping of instrumental, poetic, and referential semiotic functions (Mateu, 2010). This set

1 Semiotricity considers the nature of motor situations from the point of view of the application of systems of signs associated with the motor behaviour of participants. Referential semiotricity

(approaching and external theme to the practice itself) that is directly related to those artistic-expressive practices (Parlebas, 2001).

of semiotic functions² is directly linked to intentionality and, therefore, to the goals of GfA groups and, more specifically, their choreographies. Thus, EMS ends up being driven by a) purpose of the motor action, by b) communication, by c) predominance of the poetic function in communication, by d) referential semiotricity and by d) aesthetic intentionality of the motor action (Mateu, 2010).

THE GYMNASTICS FOR ALL SPORTIVISATION PROCESS AND ITS RELATIONS WITH THE ARTISTIC-EXPRESSIVE DIMENSION

The unfinished sportivisation process previously mentioned is a determining factor not only to characterise GfA as an EMS, but mainly to understand why this artistic-expressive dimension may be developed differently among groups. Thus, there is a significant distinction between the expressive potential of GfA and other kinds of gymnastics, such as rhythmic gymnastics and aerobic gymnastics. Although all of them have been characterised as EMS, in the case of sportivised disciplines, the artistic-expressive subdomain is submitted to Code of Points for each discipline.

The presence of these codes is strongly related to the competitive and, consequently, sportivised character of sports disciplines. Regarding the development of the artistic-expressive aspects, the criteria established in these documents to measure performance directly influence composition of routines and subsequently guide the artistic components of the performances (Mateu & Bortoleto,

2011; Toledo & Antualpa, 2016). For instance, when observing the Code of Points for rhythmic gymnastics, the section dedicated to the artistic components, where the guidelines to evaluate the “composition and artistic performance from the standard of aesthetic perfection” are (FIG, 2022, p. 112), each component of the artistic-expressive dimension is detailed in order to regulate how it should be developed within a routine – the music, the rhythm, the body expression, the character/interpretation, the use of space, the dance steps, the harmony, the connections, among other elements.

This means that, even if gymnastics sports and even figure skating and artistic swimming are recognized, including socially, by its artistic-expressive dimension and, moreover, are characterised as EMS from the theory assumed here, the imposition and enforcement of these codes make it impossible for the primary objective of these sports to have referential functions. The artistic-expressive dimension is an important part of the internal logic of these sports, but it is limited by their rules, which also limit their aesthetic categories.

Due to its unfinished sportivisation process (Silva, Menegaldo, Almeida & Bortoleto, 2021), GfA does not have a regulation to develop its artistic-expressive potential and, thus, it does not have an objective evaluation of these elements. The music, the costumes (which, different from gymnastics sports, do not need to be leotards), the body expression, the use of space (directions, levels and movements), the use of dance and theatre elements, and also elements of other cultural manifestations may be explored and included in GfA choreographies in multiple

2 Semiotic function refers to the general ability to signify and consists of the production (coding) and reception (decoding) of signs. When this ability is

applied to motor actions, it is called semiotic function (Parlebas, 2001).

ways (Carbinatto, Soares & Bortoleto, 2016; Pasqua, Hess & Toledo, 2020; Paoliello, Ayoub, Toledo, Bortoleto & Graner, 2014), as long as they are aligned with the expressive project developed by the group, i.e., with the idea/message that the group expects to achieve during a performance. In this sense, while observing

the EMS categories proposed by Mateu & Bortoleto (2011), GfA seems to move between different categories, for example, a *quasi-expressive sport* (predominantly expressive-communicative objective) and *expressive sport* (predominantly instrumental objective).

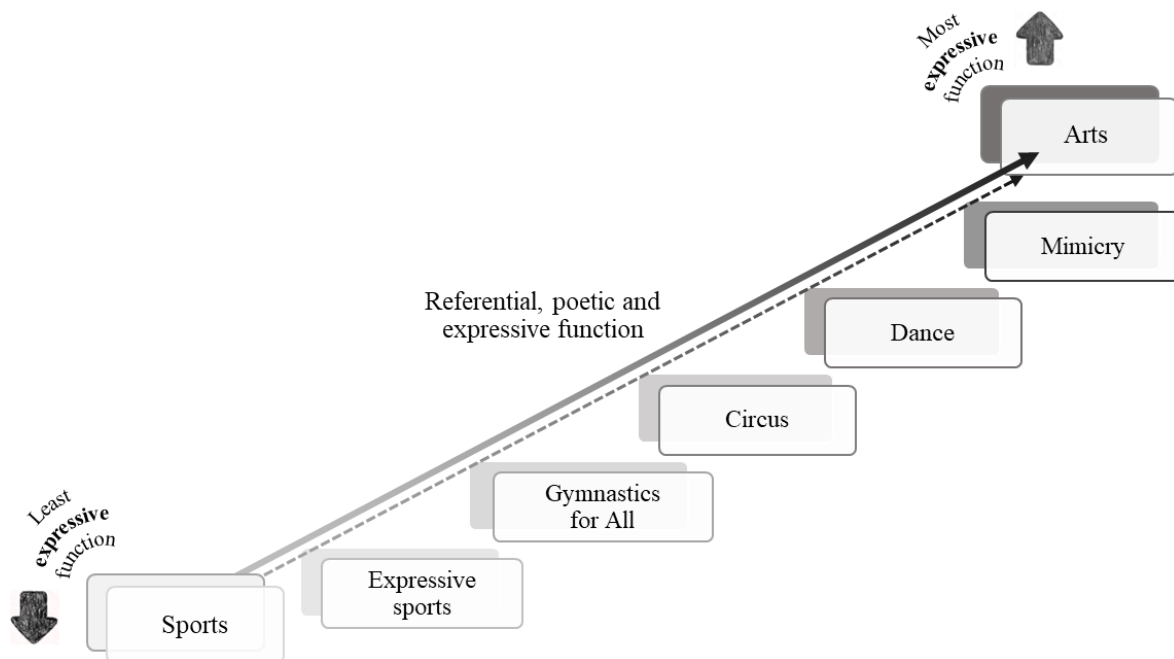


Figure 4. Continuum of Expressive Motor Situations (Mateu, 2010).

These categories are proposed from semiotic functions of each motor situation building a notion of *continuum* (Mateu, 2010). In this *continuum*, which has Sports at one side and Arts at the other (see Figure 4), it is possible to identify the increased poetic, expressive and referential functions as we approach the end related to artistic practices. GfA comes right after *expressive sports*, bringing it closer to different art forms (circus and dance). Nevertheless, this likely approximation of GfA to other artistic forms comes from the development of its expressive potentiality. However, as we

mentioned before, this development may vary among GfA groups.

The prevalence of expressive, poetic, and referential functions is, as other elements of the GfA internal logics, conditioned by choices, goals and strategies established by each group (Menegaldo & Bortoleto, 2020), since the emergence of the symbolic function related to metacommunication is not imposed. This dimension may, and, to our understanding, should make up the choreographies. However, this will depend on the goal of each group not only regarding choreographic composition, but also on the

investment in dynamics and teaching proposals on expressive functions during training and daily group activities.

In that sense, although the expressive function becomes visible in choreographic compositions, it can also compose the group's processes (Almeida, 2016; Lopes, 2020; Paoliello, Ayoub, Toledo, Bortoleto & Graner, 2014). The development of expressive skills can be worked on during collective proposals of choreographic compositions, exploration of traditional and no-traditional apparatus, creative processes of choreographic thematization. In addition, theatrical games and body expression dynamics are also examples of strategies that drive the expressive project and the development of the artistic-expressive dimension within the groups.

This is why it is not possible to place GfA at a single point on the EMS *continuum* (Figure 4). When we watch different performances in a gymnastics festival, it would be possible to state that this expressive subdomain has different “weights” in different choreographies. In some groups, semiotic, referential, expressive, and even poetic functions prevail, without reducing praxic or instrumental functions. Nevertheless, in some groups, due to their technical and composition choices, praxic and instrumental functions are emphasised, minimising the expressive potential from a semiotic perspective (Parlebas, 2001; Mateu & Bortoleto, 2011). Thus, within the same festival, distinct GfA choreographies may be located in different points on this *continuum*. This is not a problem; it just corroborates the GfA sportivisation particularities and confirms the fact that the artistic-expressive dimension is recognised and developed differently in different GfA groups and choreographies.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Similar to figure skating, artistic swimming and several other gymnastics sports, GfA is recognized as an expressive motor situation (EMS). Nonetheless, according to all concepts previously discussed, GfA combines features of gymnastics sports and those of artistic practices, which would explain the particular dialogue this gymnastics has with the sportivisation process (Silva, Menegaldo, Almeida & Bortoleto, 2021), as well as with its movement at different points of the *continuum* of expressive practices (Mateu, 2010).

Given the flexible aspect of the social contract that guides the GfA activities, multiple internal logics are allowed for its development (Menegaldo & Bortoleto, 2020). In this sense, GfA has a distinct internal logic that differs from other sportivised gymnastics disciplines, once it enables multiple expressive forms that depend on choices and approaches adopted by each group. Still, in all cases, a cooperative sociomotor gymnastics activity is observed, driven by a constant search for optimising the communication among participants, in order to favour the communication with the audience to convey what is planned for each choreographed composition – regarding emotions, a message, a theme or a story.

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