

changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings

from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS

Eleftheria Deltsoy

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Contents

Preface	11
Introduction	12

PLENARY SPEECHES

Jean-Marie Klinkenberg <i>Thinking the Novelty</i>	16
Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos <i>Continuities, discontinuities and ruptures in the history and theory of semiotics</i>	30
Farouk Y. Seif <i>Resilience and Chrysalis Reality: Navigating Through Diaphanous Space and Polychronic Time</i>	52
Göran Sonesson <i>The Eternal Return of the New. From Cultural Semiotics to Evolutionary Theory and Back Again</i>	68
Κάριν Μπόκλουντ-Λαγοπούλου <i>Γιατί η Σημειωτική;</i>	88

SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES

Mari-Liis Madisson, Andreas Ventsel <i>Analysis of Self-descriptions of Estonian Far Right in Hypermedia</i>	102
Joseph Michael Gratale <i>The 'War on Terror' and the re-codification of war</i>	112
Emile Tsekenis <i>'African modernity': Witchcraft, 'Autochthony', and transformations in the conceptualizations of 'individual' and 'collective identity' in Cameroon</i>	122
Sofia Kefalidou, Periklis Politis <i>Identity Construction in Greek TV News Real-Time Narratives on Greek Financial Crisis</i>	134
Anthony Smyrnaiois <i>Discerning the Signs of the Times: The role of history in conspiracism</i>	144
Όλγα Παντούλη <i>Ο 'αριστερός' και ο 'ανατολίτης' σύζυγος στις αφηγήσεις γυναικών επιστημόνων: διαδικασίες επιτέλεσης του φύλου τους</i>	152
Μαριάννα Ψύλλα, Δημήτριος Σεραφής <i>Η ανάλυση ενός γεγονότος μέσα από τον πολυσημικό λόγο των εφημερίδων: Μία μεθοδολογική και πολιτική προσέγγιση του Δεκέμβρη του 2008</i>	160
Αλεξία Καπραβέλου <i>Ο ρατσισμός σήμερα μέσα από τη σημειωτική ανάλυση γεορτάζ εφημερίδων</i>	170

SPACE AND/IN SOCIETY

Eleftheria Deltsoy <i>Salonica Other Ways – Otherwise': A Mirror-λ letter and heterotopias of an urban experiment</i>	186
Fotini Tsiibiridou, Nikitas Palantzas <i>Becoming Istanbul: a dictionary of the problematics of a changing city; inside critique of significant cultural meanings</i>	196

Κώστας Γιαννακόπουλος <i>Αναφομοίωτες διαφορές, «εξευγενισμός» και πόλη</i>	206
Ιορδάνης Στυλίδης <i>Η Βιτρίνα ως ελκυστής σημασίας</i>	216
Δήμητρα Χατζησάββα <i>Αναδυόμενες έννοιες για τον χωρικό σχεδιασμό</i>	226
Θεοδώρα Παπίδου <i>Μεταγραφές ψηφιακού υλικού στον αρχιτεκτονικό σχεδιασμό</i>	236
Κωνσταντίνος Μωραΐτης <i>Τοπία σημαίνοντα</i>	248
Νεφέλη Κυρκίτσου <i>Η ολίσθηση των σημασιών στην τοπική θεωρία του Jacques Lacan</i> ..	260
Ανθία Βερυκίου <i>Τόποι απουσίας και Τοπολογικά τοπία</i>	270

VISUAL CULTURES

George Damaskinidis <i>Are University Students Followers of the World's Semiotic Turn to the Visual?</i>	284
Dimitrios Koutsogiannis, Vassiliki Adampa, Stavroula Antonopoulou, Ioanna Hatzikyriakou, Maria Pavlidou <i>(Re)constructing Greek classroom space in changing times</i>	294
Polyxeni Manoli <i>A multimodal approach to using comics in EFL classrooms</i>	308
Αικατερίνη Τάτση, Μαρία Μακαρού <i>Πολυτροπικά πολιτισμικά παλίμψηστα: η περίπτωση ενός κόμικ</i>	318
Αναστασία Φακίδου, Απόστολος Μαγουλιώτης <i>Σημεία και κώδικες: Πώς αντιλαμβάνονται τα παιδιά τη γλώσσα εικόνων που αναπαριστούν την παιδική ηλικία;</i>	332
Έφη Παπαδημητρίου, Δήμητρα Μακρή <i>Πολυτροπική κοινωνική σημειωτική προσέγγιση στη δημιουργία νοημάτων-σημείων από μαθητές/τριες της πρωτοβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης</i>	346
Θεοφάνης Ζάγουρας <i>Ο σχεδιασμός πολυτροπικών κειμένων για το γλωσσικό μάθημα στο Δημοτικό Σχολείο</i>	360
Dimitra Christidou <i>Does pointing in the museum make a point? A social semiotic approach to the museum experience</i>	374
Παρασκευή Κερτεμελίδου <i>Οι μετασχηματισμοί του μουσείου τέχνης στην εποχή της κατανάλωσης</i>	386

ART

Eirini Danai Vlachou <i>The Beatles Paradigm. Transcending a collection of 'ropey', scrappy, multi-cultural breadcrumbs into a whole new semiosphere</i>	398
Μαίη Κοκκίδου, Χριστίνα Τσίγκα <i>Η κουλτούρα των βιντεοκλίπ: η περίπτωση των μουσικών βιντεοκλίπ δια-τροπικής ακρόασης</i>	408
Angeliki Avgitidou <i>Art imitating protest imitating art: performative practices in art and protest</i>	420
Spiros Polimeris, Christine Calfoglou <i>Some thoughts on the semiotics of digital art</i> ..	430
Χρύσανθος Βούτουρος, Ανδρέας Λανίτης <i>Η Σημειο-αισθητική προσέγγιση της Βυζαντινής τέχνης ως Εικονική Κληρονομιά</i>	440
Άννα Μαρία Παράσχου <i>Τοπογραφία διάρρηξης: Φωτογραφικές απεικονίσεις πολέμου από τον Simon Norfolk, ως μια αφήγηση ανατροπής</i>	454

Pirjo Kukkonen <i>Signs of times and places in Aki Kaurismäki's films. The existential subject and the semiotic modalities of being and doing</i>	466
Christina Adamou <i>Swarming with cops</i>	478
Yvonne Kosma <i>Picturing 'Otherness': Cinematic Representations of 'Greekness' in "My Big Greek Fat Wedding"</i>	488
Χρήστος Δερμεντζόπουλος, Θανάσης Βασιλείου <i>Προσεγγίζοντας μια αφαιρετική κινηματογραφική μορφή: "Το Δέντρο της Ζωής", του Terrence Malick</i>	498
Νίκος Τερζής <i>Η σημειωτική μέθοδος ανάλυσης μιας ταινίας</i>	508
Ηρώ Λάσκαρη <i>Σύστημα γενεσιουργής οπτικοακουστικής αφήγησης</i>	524

ADVERTISEMENT

Luiz Carlos Migliozi Ferreira de Mello <i>Viagra: New Social Forms</i>	536
Nikos Barkas, Maria Papadopoulou <i>'The house of our dreams': A decade of advertisements in building magazines</i>	544
Stamatia Koutsoulelou <i>Advertising strategies in times of crisis: A semiotic analysis</i>	560
Περικλής Πολίτης, Ευάγγελος Κουρδής <i>Κοινωνιόλεκτοι σε ελληνικές τηλεοπτικές διαφημίσεις. Η περίπτωση της «γλώσσας των νέων»</i>	572
Ευριπίδης Ζαντίδης <i>Αναδυόμενες ταυτότητες και εθνικότητα σ' ένα φλιτζάνι κυπριακού καφέ</i>	588
Ελένη Συκιώτη, Γενοβέφα Ζαφειρίδου <i>Σημειωτικές παρατηρήσεις στη σύγχρονη διαφήμιση: Η περίπτωση της εμπορικής και της κοινωνικής διαφήμισης</i>	600
Βασιλική Κέλλα <i>Η διαφήμιση ως λεκτική πράξη</i>	612

LANGUAGE, TEXTS AND TEXTUALITIES

George Androulakis, Roula Kitsiou, Carolina Rakitzi, Emmanuel Zerai <i>Linguistic cityscape revisited: inscriptions and other signs in the streets of Volos</i>	622
María José Naranjo, Mercedes Rico, Gemma Delicado, Noelia Plaza <i>Constructing new identities around Languages and Media</i>	634
Ιωάννα Μωραΐτου, Ελευθερία Τσέλιου <i>Ανάλυση Λόγου και μεταμοντέρνες προσεγγίσεις στη συμβουλευτική / ψυχοθεραπεία: η «στροφή στο λόγο»</i>	642
Φίλιππος Τεντολούρης, Σωφρόνης Χατζησαββίδης <i>«Κατασκευάζοντας» το κείμενο και τον συγγραφέα: οριοθετημένα και μη-οριοθετημένα σημειωτικά πλαίσια της σχολικής γλωσσικής δημιουργίας</i>	652
Βάσια Τσάμη, Δημήτρης Παπαζαχαρίου, Άννα Φτερνιάτη, Αργύρης Αρχάκης <i>Η πρόσληψη της γλωσσικής ποικιλότητας σε κείμενα μαζικής κουλτούρας από μαθητές της Ε' και ΣΤ' Δημοτικού</i>	664
Αναστασία Χριστοδούλου, Ιφιγένεια Βαμβακίδου, Αργύρης Κυρίδης <i>'Lego-Legends of CHIMA'. Κοινωνιοσημειωτική ανάλυση της συναρμολόγησης του θρύλου</i>	676
Μαρίνα Σούνογλου, Αικατερίνη Μιχαλοπούλου <i>Η Σημειωτική στη διαμόρφωση της έννοιας του πολίτη στο νηπιαγωγείο</i>	686

BODIES & MINDS

Fotini Bonoti, Plousia Misailidi <i>Graphic signs of jealousy in children's human figure drawings</i>	700
Eirini Papadaki <i>The Semiotics of Children Drawings, A Comparative Study of Art, Science and Children Drawing</i>	708
Myrto Chronaki <i>Changing practices and representations of birth and birth-spaces in maternity clinics and at home</i>	720
Athanasios Sakellariadis <i>Metaphor as a Hermeneutical Design of the Mental Phenomena: The role of narrative speech in the cognitive field of the Philosophy of Mind</i>	730
Anita Kasabova <i>A semiotic attempt to analyze delusions</i>	738

LITERATURE

Miltos Frangopoulos <i>The Task of the Translator</i>	756
Fitnat Cimşit Kos, Melahat Küçükarslan Emiroğlu <i>Reality as a Manner of Transformation</i>	766
Angela Yannicopoulou, Elita Fokiali <i>Transmedia Narratives for Children and Young Adults</i>	778
Ioanna Boura <i>The expression of worldviews through narratives and chronotopes of liquid times</i>	790
Evgenia Sifaki <i>The "Poetic Subject" as "Subject of Semiosis" in C. P. Cavafy's "Going back Home from Greece"</i>	798
Αγγελική Παννικοπούλου <i>Το εικονογραφημένο βιβλίο χωρίς λόγια</i>	808
Μαρίνα Γρηγοροπούλου <i>Κόσμοι που συγκρούονται και σημεία των τεχνών: οι «Σκοτεινές Τέχνες» του Νίκου Κουνενή</i>	818
Σοφία Ιακωβίδου <i>Εις τα περίχωρα της δυστοπίας: αφηγήσεις της κρίσης στη λογοτεχνία για νέους</i>	826
Πέγκυ Καρπούζου <i>Το παιχνίδι και η ηθική της μετανεωτερικής συμβίωσης</i>	834
Αγλαΐα Μπλιούμη <i>Ρευστοί καιροί και μεταφορές – Σημειωτικές προσεγγίσεις στη λογοτεχνία της ενωμένης Γερμανίας</i>	844
Παναγιώτης Ξουπλίδης <i>Ένας οικείος δαίμονας: προς μια προσέγγιση του σημείου της λογοτεχνικής γάτας σε 7 κείμενα παιδικής λογοτεχνίας του Χρήστου Μπουλώτη</i>	856
Conference Credits	868

Identity Construction in Greek TV News Real-Time Narratives on Greek Financial Crisis

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Abstract

The present paper analyses a corpus of non-closure TV news texts on the Greek financial crisis (year 2009) as instances of narrative discourse. We argue that by opting to storify meaning and information that is not by default eligible for narrative representation, the texts in question attempt to confine their possible interpretations and cue their readers to position (Bamberg, 2004) themselves in very specific ways with respect to the (re)presented events and the conveyed information. By applying the latest cognitive and constructivist approaches to narrative (Ryan, 1993, Fludernik, 1996, Herman, 2009), we propose that the latter is a semiotic code to which our specimen texts resort with the effect of naturalizing (Fiske, 1999) the identity constructed and intended for the viewers. We further scrutinize the semiotic means that cue viewers to interpret the texts as narratives and “find their place” in the story.

Keywords

TV news, narrative, positioning, narrativization, storification

Introduction

TV news texts are open to several interpretations. However, it is unanimously accepted that the way they are organized attempts to control and confine the range or their potential readings (Fiske, 1999). This is achieved by homogenizing the variety of the socio-cultural experience that their viewers might bring in, in order to interpret the texts and, therefore, by encouraging certain positioning from the viewers' part towards them. In other words, by (re-)constructing their readers' identity. At the same time, (critical) discourse analysis has long recognized journalistic discourse as the field where dominant discourses are reproduced and circulated without any explicit reference to their sociopolitical or ideological origin. This practice has serious implications on the way they represent reality and, according to Fairclough (1995, p.5), on the kind of identities and relations they draw up for the participants involved in both the story level and the level of the communicative interaction.

That said, the analysis of the mediating role of TV news becomes fairly relevant when tackled against the broader context of a social crisis exactly because of the impact of their representations on the viewers' construing of a reality-in-flux and the latter's emerging stance towards the new status quo. Especially in the Greek case, the outbreak of what was initially thought of as a deep-crisis in the wake of the 2008 global economic crash, soon led to the collapse of a nation and culture specific master narrative about a powerful and stable European country and the emergence of (not really) new projected master plots attempting to explain what went wrong and, at the same time orienting Greek citizens towards new identities.

With these in mind, our present paper focuses on the exploration of the viewers' images that TV news texts projected at the beginning of the crisis and the scrutinization of the semiotic means by which those images were constructed. Our central claim is that TV news discourse resorted to the storification of the crisis and to its narrative representation, as a powerful schema of "folk psychology" (Herman, 2009) and, in this way, it employed its recipients as passive and helpless undergoers whose fate was to be determined by decision making institutions "far, far away". In other words, narrative itself was employed as a cultural and semiotic code that channeled viewer's mental representations of the events and of themselves within them.

Under this view, we have collected our material by examining TV texts of the evening news program that were produced within the time span of 27/11/2009 to 10/12/2009 by a single private station (Antenna). The station does not show any particular preference to narrativization as a mode of presenting the news and achieving the goal of infotainment (Dunn, 2005). In this way, we assured that our results would have some generalizing value and would not be specific to the sociolinguistic profile of this particular channel. The selected texts display the special attribute of non-closure, that is, of being subject to consecutive updates from one broadcast to the other. We can therefore monitor the several stages of the storification- of- content and narrativization- of- discourse processes and the positioning of the viewers.

The framework and some theoretical concepts

Our analysis approaches narrative in a cognitive-semiotic way (Fludernik, 1996, Herman 2009, Ryan, 2010). Within this approach narrative is (above and before any linguistic realization) a mode of thinking, a cognitive tool for the manipulation of events conceived and experienced as ruptures upon a situation that is cognitively established by the experiencing (or reporting) consciousness as canonical or normal (Bruner, 1990, Herman 2009, 2013). Narrativity is then a special kind of meaning, which can be encoded by a variety of semiotic means. According to Fludernik (1996), narrative meaning is rooted in human experience of agency, while the basic experiential schemata available for stories are just two: "there is either an agent who achieves things or an experiencer to whom things happen" (1996, p. 54).

Secondly, we regard meaning as the representation that the reader makes out of a text cued by its semiotic means and based on his social experience. Following Fludernik (1996), we embrace the idea that narrativization is a reading strategy supported and encouraged semiotically by the text enabling the reader to familiarize unfamiliar texts.

Finally, we should note that our model also allows for real-time and serial narrative (Ryan, 1993) and approaches it as real-time emplotment process, that is as an on-line interpretation of the events along some global thematic patterns.

On the other hand, we rely on approaches from the field of social psychology which are interested in the way narrative-in-interaction constructs the identities of the participants in the communicative event (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). More specifically, we use Bamberg's first and second level of narrative positioning (1997, 2004) to argue that we find the identity of our specimen texts' recipients interwoven with the construction of contrastive pairs such as We -Greeks- Undergoers/ The Others-Europeans- Agents.

Application to the texts: Narrativizing and constructing viewers' identity

In order to best understand the dynamic process of identity constructing as far as interpreters of the texts in question are concerned, it is useful to scrutinize the semiotic means by which narrative meaning emerges locally within a single news item (27th of November, 2009). The storyline extracted from the sum of our texts includes the following events: the Governor's of the Bank of Greece and the Minister's of Economy joint statements on the stability of Greek economy are foregrounded against the continuous rise in the cost of public borrowing. We are then lead through a week of increasing pressure by the EU on the Greek government to pursue austerity measures climaxing to the European demand, expressed during the Ecofin meeting, of altering the Greek public budget. The demand is followed by continuous negotiations, the downgrading of Greece's creditworthiness by an international rating agency and is finally culminated in the PM's statement that the country's sovereignty is at stake.

The fact that the storyline is itself a construct created by selection and sequenced presentation of events cannot be overstated. The events are emploted into the follow-

ing dominant theme pattern which can be titled “DO OR DIE FOR GREECE”, “GREECE WITH ITS BACK AGAINST THE WALL” etc. The crucial issue that arises is how the texts manage to construct such a “folk” understanding¹ of Greek state’s political and financial situation. After all, an alternative way of reporting on the events by contextualizing them within the economico-political model of finance capitalism or by inviting into the texts the discourse of scientific explanation (Herman, 2009, p. 98) could be, at least in principle, conceivable and presumably more effective in informing the audience. However, scholars that critically approach journalistic discourse often stress that it “masks the political origin of discourse(s)” (Fiske, 1999, p. 43), a process known as exnomination. We argue that narrativization builds up to the discourse’s exnominating and naturalizing effects by accounting for events in terms of agents and victims and sudden twists of plot. In other words, by opting for the “episodic framing” of the represented reality at the expense of the “thematic framing” that “focuses more on broader social issues, such as social, political and economic forces” (Carter, 2013, p. 7). In order to see the emplotment process at work, we cite below the text of the 27th of November, 2009.

<p>Παρουσιαστής/ Newscaster</p>	<p>Μηα λίγο καλύτερι μέρα από τι χθ esiní ítan túti edó ja tin elinikí ikonomía. Íxame tin prospáθia ce από ton ipuryó ikonomikón ce από ton diicití tis trápezas tis eláðos, me ðilósis tus, na válun fréno sta pexníðja cerðoskopías, íxame καλύτερι ikóna sto xrimatistirió mas pu ciníθice θetiká. Íxame, ómos próvlima me ta spreads, ta epitócia me ála lója pu ðanízete i eláða ta opía ektokséftikan sta ipsilótera tu teleftéu trimínu</p>	<p>It was a somewhat better day today, concerning Greek economy. We had the conjoint statements by the minister of Economy and the Bank of Greece governor attempting to put a stop to the speculating games, it’s been an upday for our stock market but we had the bond yield spreads, in other words, the interest with which Greece is borrowing widening and reaching the highest levels of the past three months.</p>
<p>Ρεπόρτερ- Reporter</p>	<p>Ðramaticí prospáθia ja na anakopún i cerðoskopikés piésis se város elinikón omolóyon ce metoxón ékanan από cinú o ipuryós ikonomikón ce o ðiicitís tis trápezas tis eláðos.</p> <p>“Ta pexníðja ton cerðoskopón ðen epireázun to elinikó dimósio”, ðiaminí o jóryos papakonstandínu, símfona me ton opío, “I eláða ðen éci anáñgi ðanizmú”.</p>	<p>A joint dramatic effort to put a stop to the pressure that speculators put on Greek bonds was made today by the Minister of Economy and the Governor of the Bank of Greece</p> <p>Profiteering and speculating games do not affect Greek public dept, states Mr Papakonstantinou, according to whom Greece is in no need of a loan.</p>

<p>Ρεπόρτερ- Reporter</p>	<p>Stin ayorá ton omolóyon, pándos, i pistotés tis xóra mas zítisan akómi ipsilóteri apódosi oðiyóndas ta spread sta ipsilótera ton teleftéon déka minón.</p>	<p>In the bond market, however, our country's creditors demanded for even bigger yield which led to the widening of bond yield spreads to the highest levels of the past ten months.</p>
<p>Υλικό από δηλώσεις Παπακωνσταντίνου/ footage-Papakonstantinou (minister of Economy)</p>	<p>I anataráksis stis ayorés tis teleftées meres íne apória tis xaménis aksiopistías tis xóras mas pu klirodótise I proiyúme-ni civérnisi alá ce apotélezma cerdoskopikón ciníseon</p>	<p>Markets over the past few days have been reacting to the loss of our country's credibility which is inherited from the previous government. Their nervous reactions are also due to speculative moves.</p>
<p>Ρεπόρτερ/ Reporter</p>	<p>Metá apó dío meres ptosis sto xrimastírio tis aθínas emfanístikan ayorastés férnondas cérði stoη genikó díkti timón alá ce stis metoçes tvn trapezón pu xtes íxan ðextí éndonés piéisis.</p>	<p>After two days of continuous losses, the stock market of Athens has finally had profits. An upday for banking stocks as well that yesterday had been under pressure</p>
<p>Υλικό από δηλώσεις Προβόπουλου/ Footage- Pronoroulos (governor of the Bank of Greece)</p>	<p>To trapezikó sístima tis chóraz mas íne ijiés ce staθeró: i díktes cefaleacís epárcias íne ispilí, veltiúmeni ce ipsilóteri, kata méso óro, apó tus andístixus díktes álon trapezón.</p>	<p>Our country's banking system is healthy and stable, capital adequacy ratios are high and improving and on average higher than those of other banks.</p>
<p>Ρεπόρτερ/ Reporter</p>	<p>“Orizménes ekthésis ja tin elinicí ikonomía yráfonde apó analités pu ðen íne andicimen-icí”, anaférun cíkli tu ipurjío ikonomikón, tin íðja óra pu i Financial Times tonízun pos i eláða ce to Dubai apodikníun pos to sístima paraméni astaθ és ce i Guardian me tus Times tu lonðínu anaðikníun to meyaló élíma tis chóraz mas.</p>	<p>Specific reports on Greek economy are written by non objective analysts, officials of the Ministry of Economy state, while the Financial Times stress the fact that Greece and Dubai prove that instability remains and the Guardian together with London Times highlight our country's great deficit</p>
<p>Δηλώσεις εκπροσώπου του ΚΚΕ/ footage- Communist Party representative</p>	<p>I plutokratía cinðinolojí ja na ðextí o laós na plirósi ta xréi pu afti ðimiuryí</p>	<p>Plutocracy trusts ring false alarms in order for the people to pay the debt that it creates</p>

Ρεπόρτερ/ reporter	Ce ólafta líjes meres prin apó to néo crash test tu papakonstandínu sto ecofin ópu θα metaví éxontas ipó mális ton néo proipolyizmó	All these are happening only a few days before Mr Papakonstantinou's crash test in Brussels, where he is going to present himself carrying the public budget in his hands
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Bamberg (2004, p. 6) states that analysis at the first level of narrative positioning essentially aims to “scrutinize the linguistic means used to establish the characters in the story- how they are drawn into existence² and how they are placed in relationship with one another-so that we can answer the question, “how are the characters depicted and what is the story about (its theme)?”. In our specimen texts participants are reconstructed as characters by reference to their rational actions and reactions motivated by their intentions and goals. The representation of events as embodied, intentional and motivated actions is admittedly an important cue to narrative interpretation (Fludernik 1996, Ryan 2010, Herman 2013). A variety of linguistic expressions ascribe intentions to the participants of events, interpreting at the same time their actions. For example, the joint statements by the minister of economy and the Bank of Greece Governor are emploted as a “*dramatic effort to put a stop to*” speculators’ attacks.

However, the ascription of motivation is not always explicit. Our text selects three main events to emplot: The joint statements by the minister of Economy and the Governor of the bank of Greece, the widening of spreads and *our* (sic) stock market’s upday. Those three events are sequenced by the text so that a plot pattern is created. The first event is emploted as a reaction to previous foreign attacks against Greek economy. The third as a consequence of the first (so, the goal of the Minister’s and Governor’s action was partly effective) and the increase in spreads as a twist that happened *despite* the “*dramatic effort*” of the agents. Provopoulos’ discourse and his declaration of faith in the *country’s* (sic) banking system and the claims of Ministry of Economy officials that there are certain prejudiced reports on the Greek economy are juxtaposed to the disourse of the British newspapers which report on Greece’s bad economic state. The news ticker reads “On-going attacks by mainly British press”. The text continues with the Communist Party representative stating: “Plutocracy trusts ring false alarms, *in order for the people to pay the dept that it creates*”.

In this sequence, the discourse of the British Newspapers is clearly framed by and subordinated (Fiske, 1999) to discourses of Mr Provopoulos and the reporter. The viewers are, therefore, guided to evaluate the British newspapers as prejudiced. In the light of Mr Mentrekas’ statement they are re-evaluated as “false alarm”. A very powerful connection is then created between the plutocracy (understood here as international plutocracy) and the British press as helpers of the former with their intentions quite strongly implied.

It should be fairly clear from the above analysis that emploting events as actions by ascribing intentions to the participants at the same time distributes and assigns roles of either

agents or sufferers. To exemplify, active voice constructions and expressions yielding hostility and power are used to represent (and at the same time to interpret by description) the activity of hedge funds speculators³, the British newspapers and international plutocracy: *demanding, profiteering, speculative moves, put pressure on, ongoing attacks, they stress the fact that* etc. The same pattern is encountered in all our specimen texts regarding EU officials and foreign financial institutions or organizations, such as the Deutsch Bank, the IMF or the Ecofin.

On the other hand, the position of the undergoer, the receiver of the action, is occupied by the Greek government, the Greek prime minister, Greek economy and Greece (by personification, e.g. *l eláða tha perási sti fási tis akómi pço sklirís epitirisis/ Greece will enter a phase of even more strict supervision (29/11/09)*). Hence, the actions undertaken by the Greek officials are emploted as re-actions to agents' prior aggressive activity. In other words, they are interpreted as defense moves, often hopeless (e.g. *ðramaticí prospáθia/ dramatic effort (27/11/09)*), *l civérnisi stráfice se kinezikés trapezes ja na pulísi omóloya/ government turned to Chinese banks in order to sell T-bonds (28/11/09 etc.)*. Greek officials are therefore narrativized as trying to avoid taking the harsh austerity measures or, to put it somewhat differently, as mediating between EU's pressure and the final recipient of this pressure, the Greek people: e.g. "*O ðiefθindís tis Deutsche Bank zití míosi misθón se ðimósio ce ðéko [...], enó ðen íne líji aftí pu piézun na efarmostí sti xóra mas to mondélo tis irlandías/ The manager of Deutsche Bank demands wage cutting in public sector and state owned companies [...] while many are pushing for the implementation of the Irish model*" (28/11/09), "*klimácio tis EE ce tu ΔNT tha metaví stin aθíva zitóndas eksijísis apó tin civérnisi ja ta métra pu skopévi na pári⁴/ EU-IMF auditors are expected to arrive in Greece demanding explanations from the government concerning its measure-taking intentions*" (29/11/09), "*Protofanés étima ton vrikselón: zitún apó tin elinící civérnisi na aláksi ton proipolojizmo [...]. Epóðina, sklirá métra se város misθotón ce sindaksiúxón psospaθún na epiválun i vrikséles/ unprecedented demand by the EU: they demand that the government changes the state budget [...]. EU is trying to impose harsh austerity measures at the expense of wage earners and pensioners*" (30/11/09). Greek representatives are reconstructed as what classical structuralist narratology would term the "hero/ subject of the quest", the actant that undertakes a duty desiring, in our case, to "disjoin" himself from the "object", which, in our case, would be the taking of the austerity measures. Greek people are then the "senders", that is, the actants that would benefit from the hero's success or suffer, in case he fails.

The issue at stake at this point of the analysis is the manner in which the identity constructed for the "Greek people", as implied participants in the storyline, is discursively projected onto the receivers of the TV news texts. Bamberg's (1997, 2004) analysis of the second level of narrative positioning proves very useful in this case: the question to be answered at this level is "how does the speaker position him/herself to the audience?". (Bamberg, 1997, p. 337). The place where such interactional meanings emerge is, beyond doubt, the discourse of the newscaster. It is his discourse that creates an extended, quasi-metonymical here and

now as a point of reference for the correct interpretation of the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of the events and, in turn, the “now” constitutes the time of the narrative interaction, the “real” broadcast time, when he addresses his audience. As it is obvious from our sample text from the 27/11/09 news program, a collective we is constructed that includes the news presenter/reporter and their audience (e.g. *We had the conjoint statements [...], it’s been an upday for our stock market...months*). The construction of the collective we-identity is verified by the texts, as the narrativization of the participants as protagonists goes hand in hand with the construction of contrastive pairs such as “us/ them”, “Greeks/ foreigners”, “heroes/ villains”, “weak/ strong”, which are naturalized as they are mapped onto the spatial distinction in/ out, that is, within the country where we are/ out of the country where they stand. It is from this point of view that the twist of Brussels’ demand from Greece to modify the public budget is evaluated as “unprecedented” and “un-heard of”. The very fact that it was interpreted as an *external* intrusion upon our *internal* affairs explains the news caster’s “infuriated” stance. Finally, it is worth noting that the absence of footage depicting the co-presence and interaction of members of the Greek government with Eurocrats or IMF officers also has its significance. By keeping them apart in the spatio-temporal level, the text metaphorically keeps them apart into the abstract level of identities, enhancing the contrast between “us and them”.

Some concluding remarks for future research: serial TV news viewers as “eyewitnesses”

As extensively analyzed above, TV news texts are produced in a way that guides their viewers to the desired interpretations. These are not “imposed” to the reader. Rather, they emerge *naturally* and are communicated to the reader within a context of reliability, authenticity and objectivity. These values acquire a special meaning when it comes to real time news narratives. Apart from the common identity between journalists and viewers as “we- Greeks”, the former share with the latter a very important common feature. The narrators are equally ignorant of the plot and future development of the story as the narratees. This is a potential psychological point of reference for the viewers to “empathize” with and confide in the journalist’s discourse.

Under this view, the analysis of conversationalization mechanisms of the journalistic discourse, namely, conventionalized metaphors, idiomatic and phrasal expressions from every-day speech etc, apart from serving the commonly acknowledged (Arhakis, 2011) familiarizing function between journalists and their audience, could move one step further to claim that the journalistic discourse is attempting to imitate the voice of its readers by (re) constructing what common sense would supposedly comment while watching the events developing in front of their eyes. A plausible place to look for such meanings would be the live commentary usually following the news bulletin. Further evidence to support this view could also derive from a closer look to the re-framing of radical discourse and its embedding within and subordination to the journalist’s discourse.

Moreover, footage containing excerpts of direct discourse also acquire special meanings when examined in the context of real time news narratives. Apart from adding to the texts' narrative meaning and reinforcing its orality (Chatzisavvidis, 2008), might also be said to serve the construction of a common identity for journalists and viewers: Journalists share their access to information with the viewers and the latter are offered the opportunity to see "with their one eyes" and "for themselves" the participants of the events acting in real-time.

Endnotes

1. As stated above narrative "can be used to make sense of what goes on [...] in terms of experiences of persons" while its natural locus is the "medium sized world [...] of every day experience" and "human scale environments" (Herman, 2013, pp. 74-81).
2. The construction of verisimilar human characters is considered to be a central property of narrative texts (Fludernik, 1996, Herman, 2013). According to Fludernik (1996), the verisimilitude of agents and experiencers is achieved through the representation of experientiality (the qualia in Herman's terms (2009)). In other words, by representing what it is like for a character to go through the events of the story he forms part. This dimension of narrative discourse is not fully developed in TV news narratives. However, approaching narrativity as a gradient attribute allows us to treat TV news narratives as less typical examples of narrative.
3. The term *speculator* itself is an instance of interpretive naming (Tannen, 1979, p. 174) exhibiting the narrator's moral stance towards the participants.
4. In the majority of the texts the preferred expression referring to the EU-IMF auditors' expected arrival is the Greek verb «καταφθάνω» (*katafthávo*) which foregrounds aspects of the arrival frame that have to do with unexpected and unpleasant visits (http://www.greek-language.gr/greekLang/modern_greek/tools/lexica/triantafyllides/search.html?lq=%CE%BA%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B1%CF%86%CE%B8%CE%AC%CE%BD%CF%89&dq=).

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