

In search of the myth in multicultural website design: the case of English university website versions in the British, American and Greek locale

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Barthes (1957) has argued that the two orders of signification, namely denotation and connotation, combine to produce a myth which usually remains unobserved as it is very often taken for granted. Myths traverse various aspects of life in western societies and become evident in different forms of communication. In the present article we will attempt to investigate the ideology behind university website design through the comparative study of British and American website macrostructure with Greek websites translated into English. The present research is expected to shed some light on the unexplored area of university website design as semiosis and highlight possible points of convergence or divergence regarding education ideology in original English and translated (into English) Greek university websites.

KEYWORDS polysemiotic meaning making, website design, web identity, myth in multicultural website design

Introduction

This article addresses the issue of multicultural website design from a semiotic perspective with the aim of deciphering educational ideology in different socio-cultural contexts, namely in Britain, the U.S.A. and Greece. American and British universities, which mainly draw on private resources, have been increasingly using promotional rhetoric in their websites (Tomášková 2015: 2,18) which, according to Fairclough (1993), is characteristic of companies trying to attract customers. However, this is not the case in university websites from smaller countries such as Czech Republic or Iran, whose main resources come from the government (Tomášková

2015, Simin, Tavangar and Pinna 2011). The question that arises regarding Greek universities concerns their web identity-making and the polysemiotic rhetoric that they use when addressing a non-Greek audience.

A comparative semiotic analysis of university website design at the macrolevel, that is at the level of content categories, which can be verbal, non-verbal or polysemiotic, will allow to draw some conclusions regarding the third order of signification which is highly culture-specific. The methodological tools that we have considered suitable for exploring the social and cultural parameters that define the choice of specific content categories in this multisemiotic text type are: a) the concept of *isotopies* (Greimas 1966/1983), b) *image-text relation* (Barthes 2007) and c) the concept of *myth* (Barthes 1957). Moreover, d) the concept of *semiosphere* (Lotman 2005 [1984], 1990) will be adopted for a comparative study of web-mediated university communication on the mythical level. A brief overview of university website genre communicative functions and of website design parameters will set the context for a semiotics-oriented analysis of university website macrostructure.

Technological development and the extensive use of the internet have dramatically changed the way people communicate. In this context, websites constitute a crucial means of communication in various fields of social life, from information and education to entertainment and consumption. However, the borderline between different genres is very often blurred and discursive characteristics of one genre may be found in another. In this way, it is highly possible that users perceive a text as informative although its main function may be an operative one.

Operative discourse is extensively used in various communicative situations even in cases when it is not expected. University websites seem to constitute such an example since they represent higher education institutions which, according to Fairclough (1993: 143), 'come increasingly to operate as if they were ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to consumers'. The author refers to the marketization of education in Britain giving examples of university brochures which articulate 'together a variety of genres and discourses including elements of advertising and other promotional genres' and identifies 'new hybrid, partly promotional genres' (Fairclough 1993:146). The promotionalization of genres has been favoured through the expansion of technological means of communication since there is a plethora of multimodal message conveyance which reinforces the text's operative function.

According to Reiss (1971/2002: 42-63) there are four textual types: the informative, the expressive, the operative and the audio-medial, each with their respective functions. The last category (the audio-medial one) is, in fact, a hyper-category of multimedial texts which are accompanied by supplementary information realized through non-verbal semiotic systems. Reiss (1971/2002: 63) describes the category of audio-medial texts as an umbrella category which can include any of the other three textual types, either in isolation or in combination and are, thus, texts that can perform many functions in parallel. However, usually only one of these

functions prevails. Similarly, in university websites verbal and non-verbal elements combine to convey meaning and more than one functions are expected to be found. In literature, British and American universities are described as extremely competitive and commodified (Saunders 2010, Hill and Kumar 2009, Olssen and Peters 2005, Hill 2003, Torres and Schugurensky 2002). Thus, we expect the operative function to be more prevalent in their websites, similarly to what Fairclough (1993) found twenty-five years ago in university brochures. On the contrary, research has shown that in university websites from smaller countries such as Czech Republic or Iran, whose main resources come from the government, the rhetoric used is quite different (Tomášková 2015, Simin, Tavangar & Pinna 2011). The prevailing function of university websites in the Greek socio-cultural context remains to be analyzed.

The university website which is the object of our analysis is a product of design and as such it consists of signs. According to Nadin (1990: 428),

design principles are semiotic by nature. To design means to structure systems of signs in such a way as to make possible the achievement of human goals: communication (as a form of social interaction), engineering (as a form of applied technical rationality), business (as a form of shared efficiency), architecture, art, education, etc. Design comes about in an environment traditionally called *culture*, [...]. (Nadin 1990:428)

Design scholars have suggested specific principles regarding the design stage of organizational websites. Kent and Taylor (1998) have proposed a theory of dialogic communication for effective organizational website design in the form of five principles. Van der Geest (2001), in addition, offers a series of checklists that aim to improve communication design for organizational websites. University website design comprises of a series of decisions that the designer should take so as to ensure the best possible communication between the institution and the user. However, decision-making is influenced by the cultural context and the goals of the University which may differ in the three cases that we are going to examine. Nadin states that 'designers work towards a goal (product) to be achieved with the help of representations of this goal, i.e. with the help of semiotic means, sometimes used according to identifiable aesthetic criteria and/or cultural, economic or political factors' (Nadin 1990: 424).

Our research aims to analyse the socio-cultural factors that affect the goals of the institutions as they are semiotically represented in the design of their websites. Thus, the main research questions that will lead our analysis are the following:

i) can a multisemiotic analysis of native and non-native English university website homepages in three locales (USA, Britain and Greece) reveal differences/similarities in the respective universities' online identity-making? and

ii) can such an analysis unveil divergent/convergent education ideologies encrypted in their online presence?

In our analysis, we also take into consideration the fact that in American and British websites the target audience is both international and original while in Greek websites the native Greek audience is not addressed. Before embarking on the comparative analysis of university website design in different socio-cultural contexts a) we will describe the multisemiotic nature of the website genre and its implications for designing and b) we will present the theoretical framework and the methodological tools that allow for such an analysis.

Multisemiotic textuality

According to Yli-Jokipii (2001: 111), websites constitute a distinct genre, that of hypertexts. Some of its differentiating features in relation to printed texts are the use of hyperlinks for the formation of their hierarchical structure, which is mostly non-linear, as well as the low level of cohesion usually attained on the macrolevel, mainly through non-linguistic means, such as the clicking of a link. In fact, the visual semiotic system very often contributes to the creation of textual cohesion in hypertexts. Additionally, Storrer (1999: 40) states that coherence is not inherent in hypertexts but it can be created during the process. Thus, communicative context contributes to meaning connection.

Low level cohesion in hypertexts is a result of the fact that each web hyperlink leads to a separate and independent text, which can be the object of reading without necessarily precedent reading of the website's other textual units. This contributes to extensive use of content repetition which may be available multiple times through various sources (links). Additionally, hypertexts allow multiple reading paths since the reader is not limited to a unique linear path predefined by the author. On the contrary, the reader can create his/her own reading paths by selecting different links and even leap parts of the website and pass on to other websites (Janoschka 2004: 171-172, Yli-Jokipii 2001: 106, Fritz 1999: 222, Landow 1997: 3).

The absence of linearity found in hypertexts creates new standards in the way of reading and writing and, thus, in the way of creating meaning. It is characteristic of the genre that there are theoretically many points of introduction to the text and these are not limited to one semiotic system. The reader may focus initially on a non-verbal sign depending on the way the webpage is structured. The multimodal nature of hypertexts, such as websites, leads to the integration of multiple semiotic sources and, as a result, the reader moves very quickly from verbal signs to visual ones. Kress and van Leeuwen (1998: 205) have suggested that the process of scanning precedes the process of reading, and that scanning is related to the degree of emphasis given on various semiotic signs found in a multimodal page. During scanning, the

reader's eyes focus on the centre of visual impact, which according to Wee (1999: 21), constitutes the point of introduction to the reading path of a multisemiotic text and is its main theme. Bohle (1990: 36) points out that without the centre of visual impact the webpage remains for the reader a sum of complicated signs which compete with each other to attract his/her attention. Thus, the semiotic choices made by the website designer seem to play a decisive role in the reading process of multimodal texts and in the meaning that they manage to convey.

Theoretical background and methodological tools

For the purposes of our analysis we have adopted theories and methodological tools mainly from the field of social semiotics and Translation Studies. The comparative analysis of university websites is going to focus on the macrolevel of university website homepages, that is on the content, both verbal and visual that has been included in each linguistic version. Thus, an analytical tool is needed that will allow for the study of information units and their connection in the website. According to Nord,

The crucial concept in the analysis of the subject matter at the level of lexical items is that of isotopy. Isotopic features are semes shared by various lexical items in a text thus interconnecting the lexical items and forming a kind of chain or line of isotopies throughout the text. The lexical items linked by isotopy are referred to as the 'isotopic level', which may indicate the subject matter(s) of the text. There can be various isotopic levels in the text either complementing each other or hierarchically subordinate to one another. (Nord 2005:95)

Moreover, according to Mudersbach and Gerzymisch-Argobast (1989: 147), isotopic structures constitute a 'network of semantic relations' and, in this way, they serve to display the coherence of the text (Nord 2005: 95).

The notion of *isotopy* is a key term in social semiotics and has been suggested by Greimas (1966), a central figure in the Paris School of Semiotics. His theory of structural semantic isotopy can be applied both on lexical and non-lexical units allowing for the description of the coherence and homogeneity of meaning in a multimodal text, such as the website, by connecting figures different from one another. Through the detection of repetitive *semes* (parts of the meaning of a word) the isotopies in a text can be identified and, thus, content analysis is enhanced. Since the aim of our research is to detect similarities and differences regarding content in university websites, the notion of *isotopy* will be adopted.

Due to the multisemiotic nature of the genre we are dealing with, our study focuses on

meaning creation through the synergy of image and text. Another concept that is drawn from the field of social semiotics is that of *image-text relation*. According to Barthes (2007:50-59), the iconic message can be divided into a) literal and b) symbolic. This distinction actually refers to the separation of the denotational description of an image from the connotations that it bears. Taking for granted that every image is polysemous, Barthes (2007: 46) suggests that through verbal messages the receiver of the message is directed to the selection of specific signifieds related to the image's signifiers and to the avoidance of others. The verbal message's function in relation to the visual one he called *anchorage* and, elsewhere than in advertising, its principal function is ideological, since the reader is directed to a preselected concept (Barthes 2007: 48). In the light of these notions we can look for the connoted verbo-pictorial messages within university websites and correlate them to their communicative function in each linguistic version.

However, the aim of our analysis, which is comparative in nature, is to look for causal relations and move beyond mere description of convergence and divergence in university website content. Barthes (1957) has argued that besides the two orders of signification, namely denotation and connotation, there is a third one, that of *myth* which usually remains unobserved as it is very often taken for granted. In fact, the major function of myth is to naturalize a concept, a belief (1957:128). According to Barthes, myth comes with communicative intentions and 'its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, *made absent* by this literal sense' (1957: 122-123). The myth's effects change depending on the context of use. At the same time, myth itself participates in the creation of ideology. According to Barthes, myth doesn't seek to show or to hide the truth when creating an ideology, it seeks to deviate from reality (1957:131). He characteristically claims that 'myth is a value, truth is no guarantee for it' (1957: 122). Adopting the perspective of a mythologist, in Barthes' terms (1957: 128), we will attempt to undo the signification of the myth in university websites and realize the distortion that it imposes on the *myth-consumer*.

Moreover, through the concept of 'semiosphere' (Lotman 2005 [1984]), a central notion of cultural semiotics, analysis can be extended even further. Lotman (2005 [1984]: 205) has suggested that 'only within such a space is it possible for communicative processes and the creation of new information to be realized'. Attempting to clarify the notion of semiosphere, he has suggested that:

any one language turns out to be immersed in a semiotic space and it can only function by interaction with that space. The unit of semiosis the smallest functioning mechanism, is not the separate language but the whole semiotic space of the culture in question. This is the space we term the semiosphere. (Lotman 1990: 124-125)

Web-mediated university communication in a specific socio-cultural context constitutes

a separate semiosphere which interacts with and can be included in the wider European or even a global semiosphere. The boundaries that separate one from the other, as well as possible integration among them, can be examined through the lens of this specific notion. Thus, the notion of *semiosphere* offers a tool for the observation and analysis of the interaction of various semiotic spaces involved in our study and will help extend our research even further.

Research has shown that the cultural parameter plays a significant role in the type of information included in a website, as well as on the way information is presented and interconnected both verbally and non-verbally. Cultural differences in design, on the other hand, have been extensively studied in international marketing research (Al-Olayan and Karande 2000, Albers-Miller and Gelb 1996, Cutler and Javalgi 1992, Tansey and Hyman 1990). Also, research in international interface design has focused on differences in visual representation and website layout in different cultures (Dormann and Chisalita 2002, Schmid-Isler 2000). The culture-specific parameter of colour has also been studied at length both in Human-Computer Interaction literature (Russo and Boor 1993, del Galdo 1990) and in empirical studies (Duncker, Theng and Mohd-Nasir 2000, Barber and Badre 1998). Additionally, several studies have attempted to relate website design to Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Callahan 2011, Charalampidou 2011, Simin, Tavangar and Pinna 2011, Singh and Baack 2004, Dormann and Chisalita 2002, Marcus and Gould 2000, Robbins and Stylianou 2000). All these studies have revealed differences in various levels of website design related to the receivers' cultural background. Thus, British, American and Greek translated websites are expected to differ on the macrostructural level to which our study has been limited.

The corpus of analysis consists both of original websites in English and the translations of Greek websites into English. The present study is part of a wider research which aims to decipher the online identity-making of Greek universities when addressing a non-Greek audience. The English original websites are in fact analyzed as a point of reference for the analysis of original Greek websites and their translations into English. Thus, a translation-oriented approach is adopted focusing mainly on the translation product's adequacy with reference to its communicative goal as posited by Skopos Theory (Reiss and Vermeer, 1984). The translation product (English versions of Greek university websites) is studied through the lens of the concept of functionality and the principle of loyalty as defined in the model suggested by Nord (1991: 28 and 1997: 123-128). In the present paper our research is limited to the comparison of the translated (non-native) Greek websites to original (native) English websites which act as a monolingual comparable corpus¹. Function-oriented parameters to be taken into consideration are the addressed audiences and the macrostructural communication strategies served by the website designers in both native and non-native English versions. The question that arises is whether translated university websites from Greek into English adopt similar or different

strategies of self-projection at the macrostructural level as the ones selected by British and American universities.

Previous research results from a comparative analysis of English university websites, mainly from the USA and Britain, to smaller countries' university websites (Apperson 2015, Tomášková 2015, Callahan & Herring 2012, Simin, Tavangar & Pinna 2011, Bernardini, Ferraresi, Gaspari 2010, Callahan 2006) will constitute a point of departure for the specific research. The Greek locale has been included in two of the above studies but in the first case (Callahan & Herring 2012) the scope of research was limited to the study of linguistic choices in each website while the second one (Callahan 2006) was conducted twelve years ago and major differences have been observed in relation to the current Greek universities' online presence.

Methodology and Corpus of Analysis

The present study moves across the three levels of signification as they have been defined by Barthes (1957). At first, through the analysis of meaning-making on the denotational and the connotational level, we will attempt to answer the question of whether native and non-native English versions of website homepages use similar or different verbal and non-verbal content to portray universities in three different countries. More specifically, our aim is to detect possible *isotopies* (Greimas 1966/1983) within university websites and then study the British, American and Greek linguistic versions in English comparatively in order to find similarities and differences in the choice of website content. The concept of *image-text relation* (Barthes 2007) will allow for the study of multisemiotic isotopic realizations in a university website and will enhance a multimodal analysis at the connotational level. Moving on to the *mythical level* we will attempt to correlate monosemiotic and multisemiotic isotopies to university online identity-making and to the ideology that defines such self-portrayal. The notion of *semiosphere* (Lotman 2005 [1984]) will allow for the comparative analysis of university web-mediated communication in different sociocultural contexts on the mythical level.

The choice of website genre as an object of analysis for such research can be justified by the fact that websites are nowadays used extensively as a basic means of communication not only by private companies for commercial reasons but also by public organizations and institutions. Our study is limited to the homepage, which, according to Gambier and Suomela-Salmi (2007:248), acts as an introductory point to the website's general content and provides the user with the means and the links needed to navigate through it. The authors compare the website homepage to a table of contents which aims to attract and maintain the potential user's attention. Stockinger (2002-2003: 31-33, 47-52, 60-61, 183-190) adds that the homepage is not just the central point of access to information but also the space where the web-

site's identity (representation of the self) as well as the image of the potential receiver (representation of the other) is defined. Similarly, university website homepages mirror the whole website's content and allow for a comparative analysis in different cultural contexts.

Our corpus of analysis has been drawn from World University Rankings for 2017 and comprises of six university websites from the three locales under study, i) California University of Technology (Caltech), ii) Princeton University, iii) Oxford University, iv) London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), v) Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) and vi) National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (UOA). The websites from British and American universities (i, ii, iii and iv) were randomly selected (the first and the fifth in the rankings for each country) while the Greek ones (v and vi) were ranked among the best 1,102 universities in the world.

Multisemiotic isotopies in university websites

Predictably, an isotopy-oriented study of university website design in three different locales reveals both similarities and differences. In American and British universities we detect the repetitive use of several similar isotopies that relate to one another contributing to the coherence of the website. The most prevalent isotopy found in all four universities (Caltech, Princeton, Oxford and LSE) was that of *quality* which can be subdivided into *quality of research*, *quality of teaching*, *quality of facilities* and *quality of working environment*. These isotopies emerge from different semes found in the verbal and the visual semiotic systems. For example, the *quality of research* isotopy, which mainly defines the native English versions' design, is related to semes such as *innovation*, *critical mind development*, *competitiveness*, *efficiency*, *scientific progress*, *knowledge expertise exchange* etc. In other cases, the semes of *innovation* and *critical mind development* are related to *teaching quality*, as we will see in the example that follows. The isotopies detected are realized either monosemiotically or polysemiotically, through the use of text and image. For reasons of economy, we will present only some indicative examples drawn from the British and American websites.

In the Caltech website the user is exposed to various images accompanied by text which realize mainly isotopies related to different types of *quality* that characterize the institution. One such isotopy emerges from the use of the rhetorical figure of pictorial metaphor, which presents animals dressed as humans accompanied by the title 'New Humanities Class Explores Blurry Line Between Humans and Animals: The course takes students on a literary, historic, and philosophical journey through Ideas about what makes a human, what makes an animal, and what makes them different' (Fig. 1).

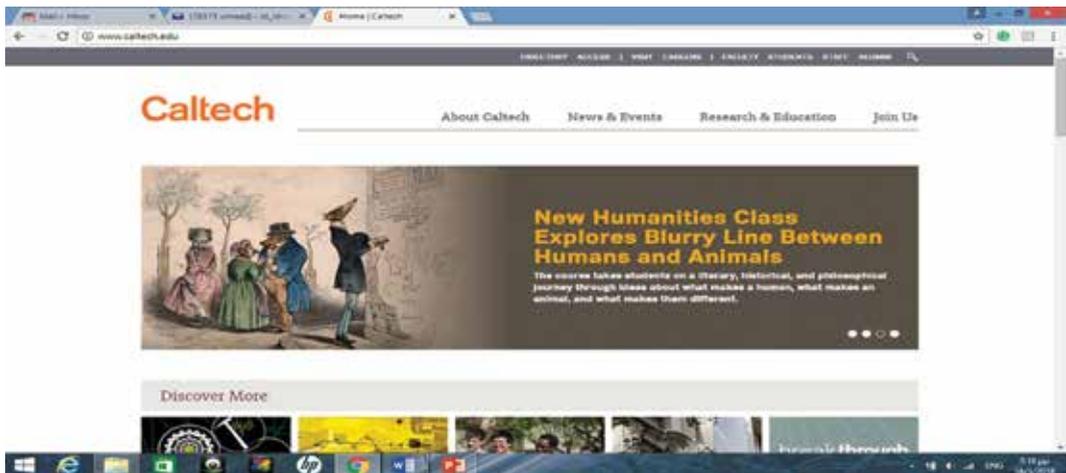


Figure 1. California University of Technology website

The image itself is polysemous (Barthes 2007) and can, thus, be interpreted in different ways. However, through the function of anchorage, the user is led to the meaning intended by the speaker, in this case the isotopy of *teaching quality* which is related to the development of students' *critical mind* as well as to the *innovative* nature of the object under study. In fact, the connotation of *innovation* ('Blurry Line Between Humans and Animals') in the text, is the one that anchors the image and directs the user to select only relevant semes that arise from the optical metaphor. In turn, the image visualizes the object of study and at the same time functions as a decorative element that adds to the aesthetics of the website design and softens the seriousness of the subject. The semantic network that is being created through the use of the above-mentioned isotopies is indicative of the perception of quality in education in the American educational culture in terms of innovativeness and development of critical thinking. The projection of this concept through the website creates, in Barthes' terms, a myth regarding the quality criteria one should set for their education always in line with the specific semiosphere's educational values.

Similarly, the isotopy of *research quality* is very often used in both British and American universities in the 'News' section. In the following example, drawn from Oxford University (Fig. 2), the semes of *innovation* and *research* are the ones that interconnect the semiotic units placed in horizontal order.

Starting from the left side we observe that in the first semiotic unit the isotopy arises from the synergy between visual and verbal semiotic systems. The image itself bears the connotation of *innovation* since it is found in the context of a university website and the text is there to further clarify its meaning leading to the selection of specific meanings found in the phrase 'computer simulations'. In the second semiotic unit the isotopic connections are created main-

ly through the verbal semiotic system ('research network') while the image relates mainly to location ('sub-saharan Africa'). The lexical unit 'network' creates additional isotopies related to other semiotic units in the website, such as the isotopy of *internationalization*, which is very often found in both British and American websites. The specific isotopy is absent in most Greek university websites, as we will see further on. This discrepancy in terms of isotopies could be interpreted as a discrepancy in educational ideology. Although the international character of the institution is highly valued in the American and the British educational culture it is not valorised in the Greek one and, thus, it is not projected. British and American universities address a wider audience and attempt to attract students from different cultural backgrounds. The promotion of an international profile serves this purpose contrary to Greek universities which focus on a more nation-oriented profile as we will see later on.

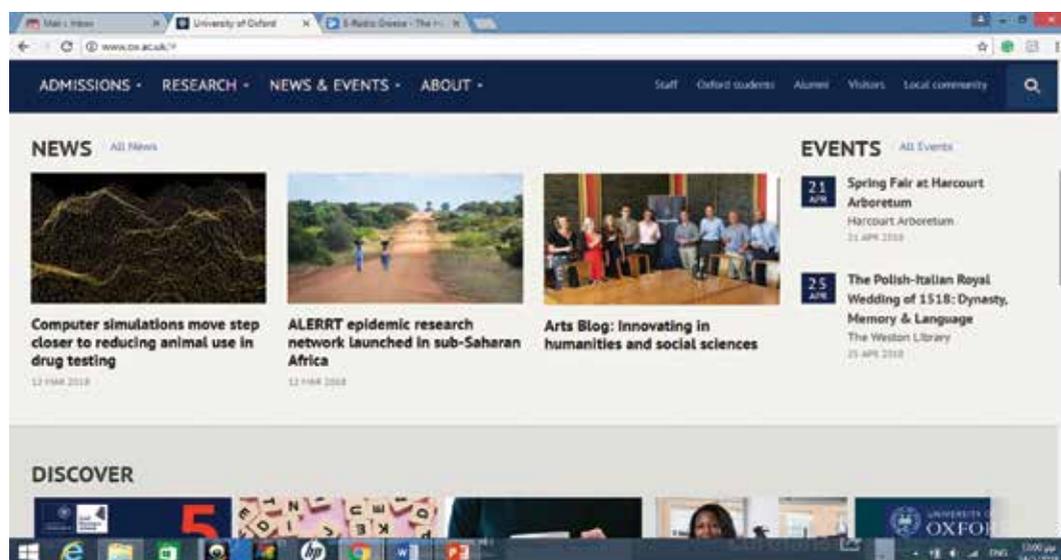


Figure 2. Oxford University website

We should stress that the isotopic interconnections can be numerous but we will attempt to restrict our analysis to the most repetitive ones. The third isotopic unit in horizontal order seems to create an isotopy with the first one through the seme of *innovation* which arises from the textual elements ('Innovation'). All three examples interconnect to create, once more, the general isotopy of *quality*, which runs across the whole homepage of the Oxford website, as well as of the other three native English university websites under study. The fact that quality is closely related to innovation in both British and American university websites is an indication of the way quality in education is perceived in these sociocultural contexts. A future orientation and a quest for the undone and the unsaid is one of the criteria set for quality definition in the two semiospheres.

The isotopic level of *quality* in its various forms is very often related to the isotopy of *respect* from the part of the institution for *women's rights*, *animals' rights*, *diversity* and *recognized academics* who are, in most cases, related to the institution. This last form of respect reaches the level of *honouring* when it is addressed towards people who are no longer alive as we can see in the following examples (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4):

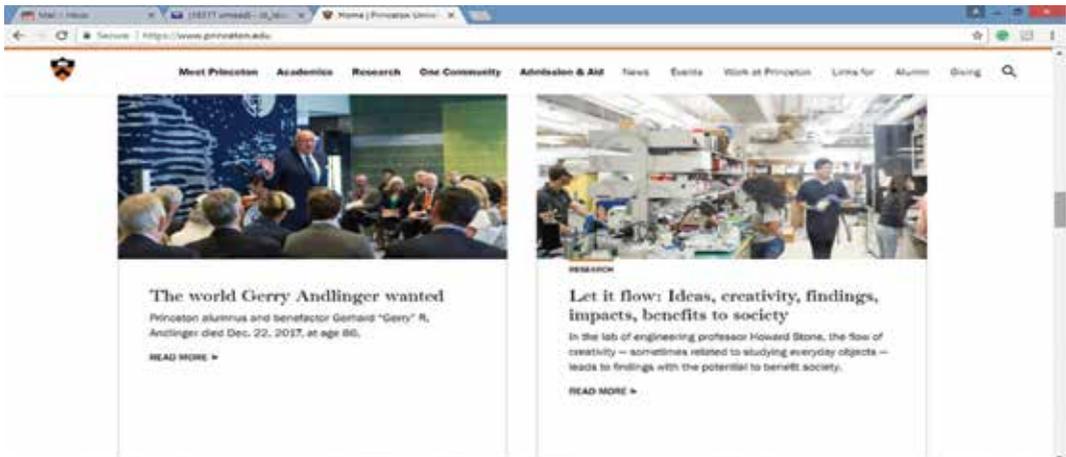


Figure 3. Princeton University website

The isotopy of *respect* in this case (Fig. 3) is related both to *university quality* since the person who is worth the institution's respect is actually a 'Princeton alumnus', as well as to the isotopy of *value of giving*, for the honoured person has donated to the specific university. The reference to the person is visualized through the image where the honoured figure is depicted in complete contrast to the seme of *death* but in harmony to the semes of *offer*, *prestige* and *expertise*. Thus, the *value of giving* isotopy is intensified through the connotation of *reputation after death*. This is also the case in the example drawn from Caltech website referring to Stephen Hawking's death (Fig. 4).

In the example cited, the isotopy of *respect towards a renowned academic* is interrelated with the isotopy of *research quality* in the institution through the phrase 'Stephen Hawking [...] a frequent visitor to Caltech [...]' (Fig. 4). The specific isotopy is repeated further down, in the lower part of the homepage, where it is overtly expressed that Stephen Hawking was one, among other renowned scholars, such as Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr (Fig. 5), of the university's visiting professors contributing, thus, to the website's coherence.



Figure 4. California University of Technology website

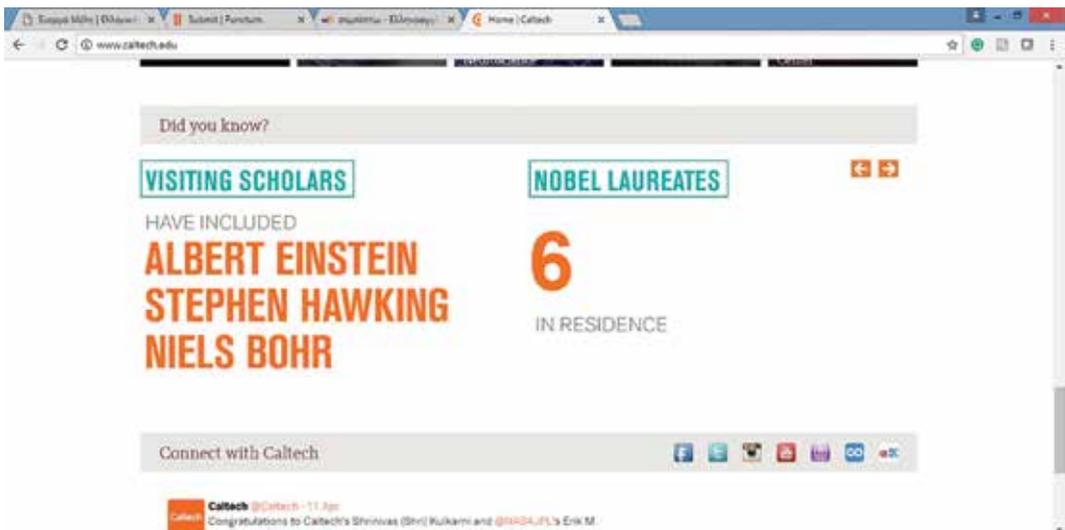


Figure 5. California University of Technology website

It is quite interesting to mention at this point that none of these isotopies actually appear in the English versions of Greek university websites, as it will become evident in the presentation of the relevant websites further down. The emphasis on the notion of *respect* towards human and animal rights as well as towards diversity found in British and American websites, absent though in Greek ones, is closely interconnected to their attempt to build an international profile that would address students around the globe. Additionally, both in British and in

American websites the isotopy of respect towards renowned academics reflects the valorization of academic excellence in both educational cultures and one more space of convergence between them.

The *value of giving* isotopy, as well as the *quality isotopy*, are both interconnected to the isotopy of *societal benefit*. The LSE website is designed in such a way that the user's introduction to the homepage is a simulation of an actual tour around the university's premises which are of high standard and quality (Fig. 6).

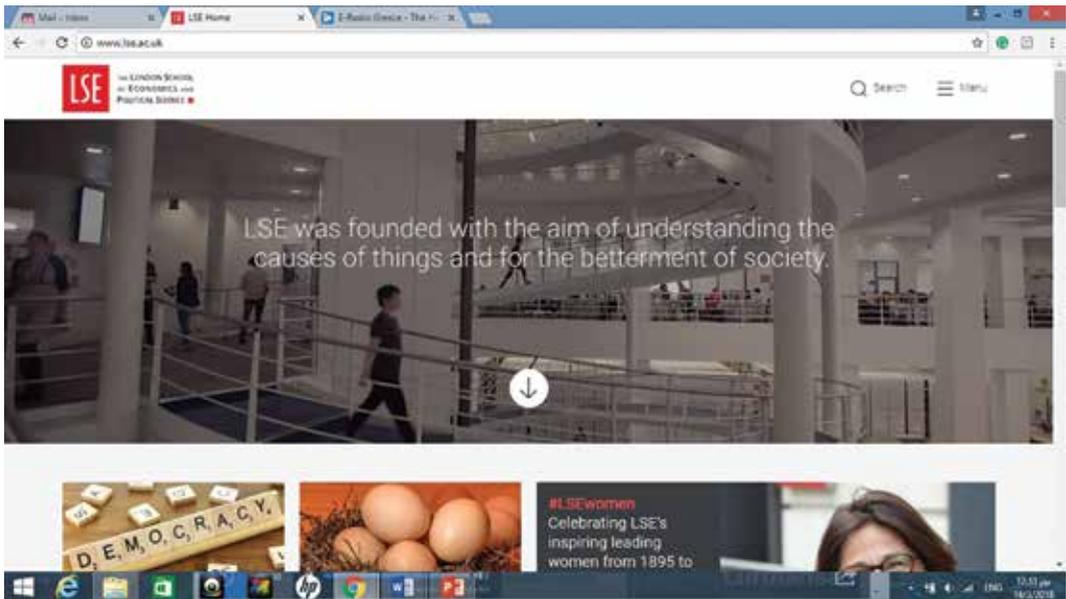


Figure 6. London School of Economics and Political Science website

The visual content is dynamic depicting people walking at the university's corridors. The vibrant atmosphere is supplemented by the textual content which overtly states the university's aim and highlights the isotopies of *scientific benefit* ('of understanding the causes of things') and *societal benefit* ('for the betterment of society'). The synergy of image and text enhances a multiplicity of isotopies to emerge in parallel, interconnecting with the isotopy of *value of giving*, which arises at the lower part of the website (Fig. 7) following the intervention of various isotopies (such as *expertise interchange*, *high quality of teaching and research with an emphasis on future efficiency*, *quality of education*, *progress*, *equal opportunities* etc.) that all lead to a positive image for the institution. Thus, education in Britain is projected as a means to improve society and lead to progress and efficiency. This concept's interconnection with the *value of giving*, which, in this context, is understood as giving to the college for the benefit of the society, justifies both the cost of education as well as the provision of great amounts of money to educational institutions.

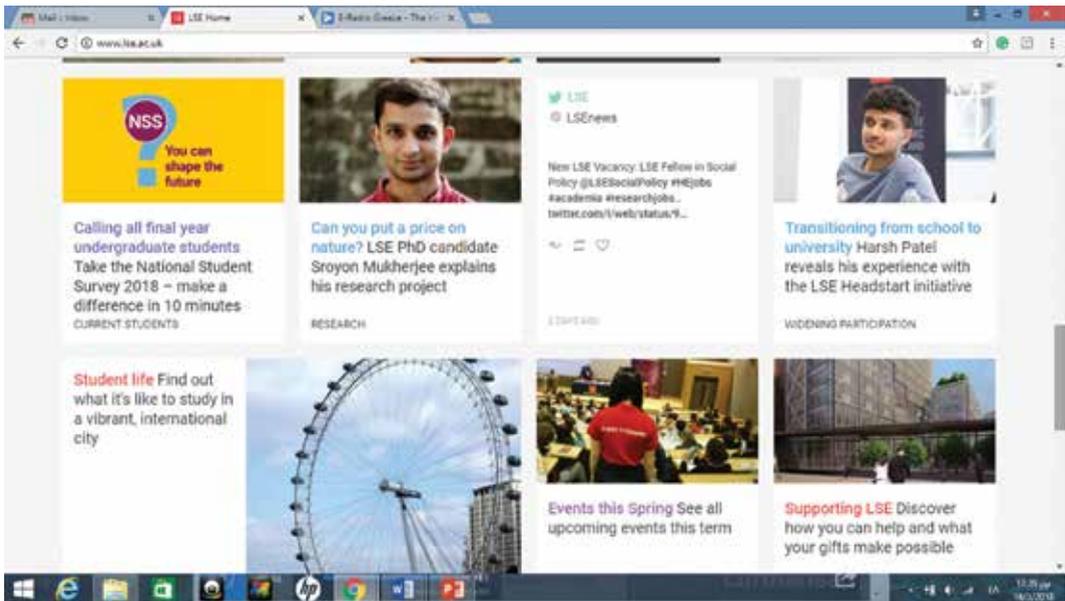


Figure 7. London School of Economics and Political Science website

The isotopy of *respect* is also very often interconnected with that of *innovation in research*. In the example that follows respect for the academic/researcher goes in parallel with the *innovative nature* of her research ('traces evolutionary theory through time') (Fig. 8). The direct link of the researcher's recognized quality to the institution's quality is made through the overt expression that the historian is a member of the Princeton academic staff ('Princeton historian'). This interconnection is also visually realized through the depiction of the historian in front of Princeton classical buildings.

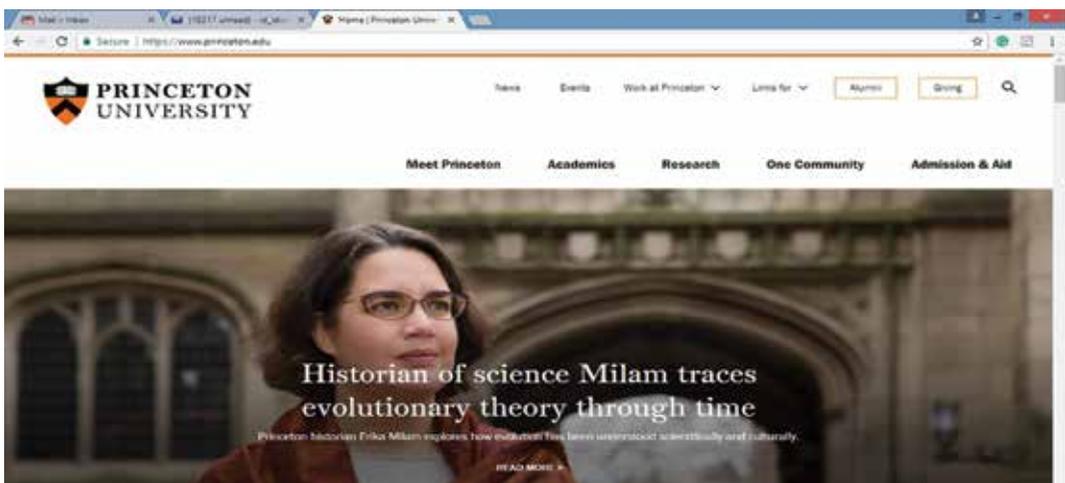


Figure 8. Princeton University website

Also, the fact that the researcher recognized is a woman goes along with the isotopy of *respect towards women's rights*, which has been found in all four English-speaking universities. The interconnection between female figure and innovation in research creates associations with the fact that education played a significant role in women's emancipation and, at the same time, evidences the idea that women are treated equally and given equal opportunities.

One more isotopy that runs across the British and American university websites is that of *equal and massive access to education*, which is interrelated with the isotopic level of *respect* especially for *diversity*. There are various instances in which universities present their programs of study along with an image that depicts students of various nationalities and of both sexes (figure 9) promoting the idea of free movement and of equal opportunities for education to everyone.

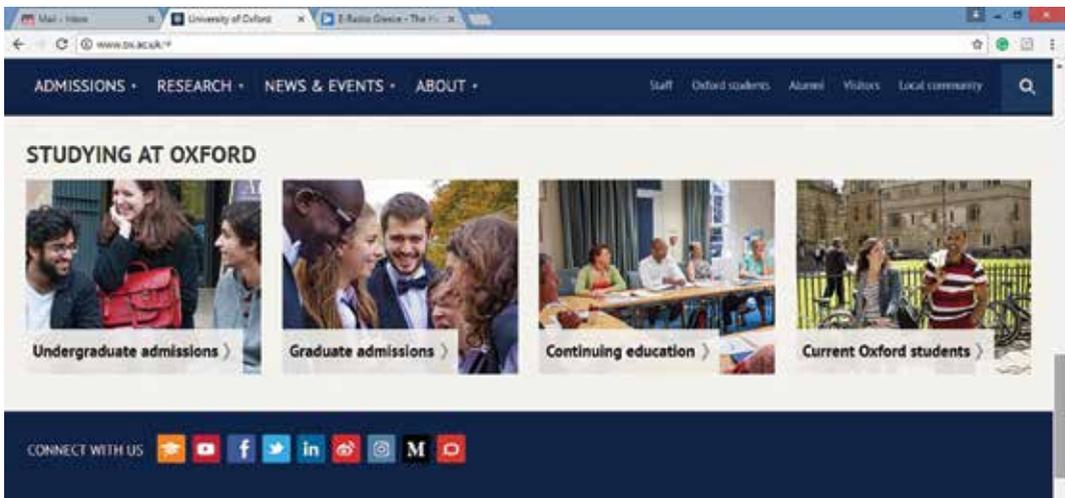


Figure 9. Oxford University website

Moreover, in many cases opportunities for financial aid are given to lower income potential students through links such as *Admissions and Aid* (Princeton University) or news for scholarships (e.g. 'The Swarovski Foundation supports scholarship in Water Science, Policy and Management', Oxford University). In the last case, the isotopy of *equal access to education* is interconnected to the *value of giving* isotopy since the foundation which supports the scholarship is made known to the public through the 'News' section. Contrary to native English university websites, the Greek ones lack completely the *value of giving* isotopy demonstrating a completely different ideological 'horizon' in Greek educational culture. Greek universities are state funded and, thus, finding resources has not been, at least up to now, a top priority. Although resources for Greek universities are very limited and they actually need donations from private resources, this is not projected in any way in the semantic web of undergraduate programme homepages.

The presentation of isotopies and their interconnections can include numerous combi-

nations but what is of interest to our research is whether these isotopies are retained in the English versions of Greek university websites and, if not, what the role of the socio-cultural context is regarding the choice of content.

Prior to presenting the isotopies found in the English versions of Greek university websites (AUTH and UOA) we would like to point out that the homepages are much simpler, especially regarding the website of AUTH, and include less isotopies than the specific genre in native English versions. Before we rush to assume that this is justified by the fact that they do not constitute the original version addressed to a Greek-speaking audience, we would like to specify that, except for the section on 'News', which has been omitted in the English version of the AUTH website, the rest of the content has been retained in both university websites. Although the audience between the original and the translated version is different the content remains identical. It is beyond the scope of this study to analyze comparatively the original and translated versions of Greek university websites but we intend to do so in future research projects.

The first case that we are going to examine is that of the Aristotle University website (Fig. 10). The design of the respective homepage includes a single figure with a plethora of connotations that create isotopies relevant to the *value of knowledge, continuity and longevity of education and knowledge, Hellenicity, antiquity and prestige through the past*. The polysemy of the image which depicts Aristotle holding a papyrus is clarified by the textual content ('Passing the knowledge baton') which leads the user to the selection of semes related to knowledge and education.



Figure 10. English version of the Aristotle University website

In the present example the visual semiotic system prevails over the verbal one, in terms of occupied space, but it is through their synergy that meaning-making is achieved. The isotopies that arise are multisemiotic in nature, since in case one of the two semiotic systems were omitted traits of the meaning would have been lost and the user could have been directed to less relevant interpretations. Although there are links that lead to information on the *university, education, research and life in Auth*, these are not supported by visual content and no emphasis is given on them compared to the native English websites, which included them repetitively in different parts of the layout. The most prevalent isotopies emerge from the website's motto as well as from the image in the background, which together constitute the centre of visual impact and the homepage's main theme. Comparing AUTH's website to the British and American ones it becomes evident that the value of *knowledge* is common but its understanding differs in the three educational cultures. British and American websites refer to *academic excellence, innovation and progress* while in the Greek website emphasis is given on the *past* through the isotopies of *Hellenicity and antiquity*. A vision to revive the past and to reach the level of quality as it was defined in ancient Greece seems to prevail in the AUTH website. The university is self-projected as a space that offers the knowledge of ancient philosophers, that is a wide-ranging knowledge. Thus, the perceptions of what a university is and what it should offer are different in each socio-cultural context as the design of their university websites indicates.

The website homepage of the UOA is very different in terms of format and layout as well as partly different with reference to the isotopies included (Fig. 11).

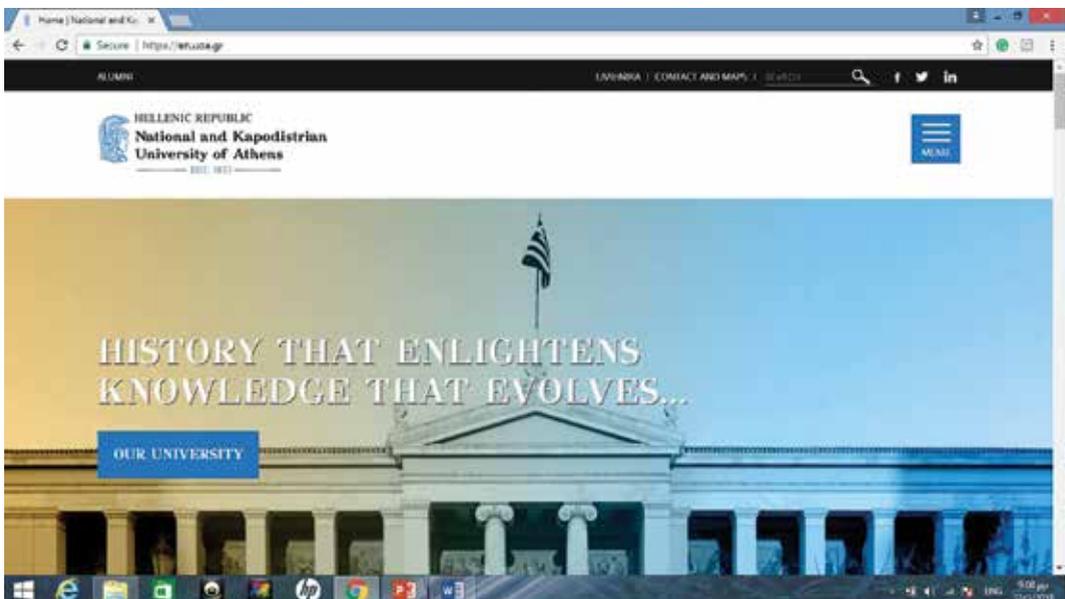


Figure 11. English version of the University of Athens website

The introductory point of the homepage consists of a multisemiotic unit made of image and text. The isotopies that emerge are those of *value of education, longevity and continuity of education and knowledge, Hellenicity, antiquity, prestige through the historic past and progress*. The image alone, without the contribution of the verbal semiotic system, can lead the user to numerous interpretations. The textual elements right in-between the flag, which is a symbol of Hellenic nationality, and the ancient classical building, highlight connotations related to the impact of Greek education from ancient times up to the present. Even the colouring schemata used in the image reflect the isotopy of *progress and evolution from the past to the present*. The isotopies that arise as the main theme of the homepage are similar to the ones found in the AUTH website.

Moreover, in the UOA website the Greek flag and the ancient building supplementing the text can be related to the isotopy of *nationhood* and to the perception that education serves the nation-state, a notion that is missing from British and American university websites, which mainly focus on their international character. The flag becomes a symbol of the close interconnection and interdependence between education and the state in the Greek sociocultural context contrary to the British and the American model where universities have created very strong bonds with the private sector.

Contrary to AUTH, the UOA website does not focus only on one main theme but relates it to other isotopies such as *modernization, quality of facilities, plethora in knowledge offer* which also bear the seme of the *past* through the black and white colour of the pictures assigned to them as well as the colouring schemata which are repeated in the form of a line and evolve from light brown-grey to light blue.



Figure 12. English version of the University of Athens website

Moreover, the website provides a separate section with the title 'UOA TODAY' where isotopies of *internationality, innovation, research quality, respect and recognition of academics, competitiveness and plethora of knowledge offered* are detected. It is worth noting, however, that the isotopy of *antiquity and past* is repeated among the isotopies that refer to the present, either in pictorial (Fig. 13) or in verbal form ('THE 35th ATHENS MARATHON, THE AUTHENTIC').



Figure 13. English version of the University of Athens website

The UOA website, contrary to the AUTH website, evidences an oscillation between two different educational cultures. Perhaps this is an indication of a transformation taking place in the Greek sociocultural context regarding the understanding of knowledge and education in general, as well as a movement of the Greek semiosphere towards the British and the American ones.

The interconnections between isotopies can be rambling and very often depend on individual interpretations. The main isotopic levels that are easily identifiable in the websites under study have been presented but we do not claim to have given an exhaustive list since this is beyond the scope of our research. Focus has been placed on isotopies and non-isotopies among different linguistic versions which allow for the interpretation of third order significance in different socio-cultural contexts.

University online identity-making and education ideology

Our analysis on the level of connotations has revealed discrepancies between native English homepages (British and American) and non-native ones (Greek). The divergence on the

isotopic level with reference to online university content depicts the way universities define themselves as well as the way they define their target audience. The isotopies that prevail in British and American websites express the universities' anxiety to project an image in line with the needs of the market. Their emphasis on *quality of research, teaching, facilities and working environment* are indicative of their effort to provide proof of *excellence* which will lead to a high score in external assessments.

In many cases, American universities, in particular, focus on their *participation in competitions, award winning and success*. This derives from the need to highlight their uniqueness and showcase their prominent place among institutions of tertiary education.

It is commonplace in British and American universities to find socially-oriented isotopies next to the isotopies of *quality* and *excellence*. In the four universities that we have studied we found repetitive use of isotopies such as *societal benefit, respect towards renowned scholars* as well as *less-known academics, respect for humans' rights and for diversity*. However, the analysis showed that the *social consideration* isotopy is undermined since, in every case, there is interconnection with the isotopy of *quality* and an emphasis on the objects' direct connection to the university that is being represented.

Moreover, it is characteristic of English-speaking universities that all the isotopies included in their websites are interconnected to the isotopy of *value of giving*. Either in the beginning or at the end of the homepage there is a link through which the user can donate to the university.

The way universities project themselves in their websites is directly related to the socio-cultural context in which they are found and to the external powers that define the way they work. In the US, for example, as well as in the rest of the world, neoliberalism has dominated (Harvey 2005) with resulting cuts to state supported social services and programs, the extension of an economic rationality to cultural, social and political spheres, and the redefinition of the individual from a citizen to an autonomous economic actor (Turner 2008, Baez 2007, Lemke 2001). The privatization and commercialization of previously publicly funded institutions extended to higher education and, as a result, universities became increasingly reliant on private funds (Giroux and Giroux 2004, Slaughter and Rhoades 2004, Hill 2003, Aronowitz 2000). These funding cuts led to ideological shifts in higher education which now defines its priorities on the basis of revenue generation, efficiency and competition (Saunders 2010: 56). Similar transformations have taken place in Britain, where public funding is selective and based upon assessments of performance governed by centralized procedures (Willmott, 2003). According to Brown and Carasso (2013), the public model of higher education in the UK up to the 1980s has been transformed into a system in which market considerations predominate.

The isotopies selected by British and American universities reflect the commodification of higher education and its submission to market rules, similarly to Fairclough's (1993) findings in university brochures. The isotopy of *equal and massive access to education* is usually inter-

twined with fee reductions, given that tuition fees are extremely high due to the dependence of universities on them as a resource of revenue. Instead of free access to education students themselves bear the responsibility of funding their education and are, thus, redefined as customers by the universities.

University online identity-making bears many similarities in Britain and the USA and this seems to be related to similar perceptions of what a university is in these two educational cultures. In Lotman's terms, these two semiospheres seem to come closer to create a unified whole, contrary to the Greek educational culture in which the university is still largely defined through the past. Greek translated university websites into English indicate different ideological conceptions on education related to a separate semiosphere.

In Greek university websites a diverging communication strategy prevails, in line with a different educational tradition. On the isotopic level, the design of the AUTH website reflects a focus on the *value of learning for its own sake*. The design is plain consisting of a single image and the university's moto. The university's *prestige* seems to be self-evident due to associations with the *glory of antiquity* and the emergence of isotopies related to *the value of knowledge, continuity and longevity of education and knowledge* and *Hellenicity*. The university's communication strategy addresses the potential student as a free individual who can choose any field of study rather than as a customer, since there are no tuition fees involved, at least on an undergraduate level, and the university is mainly funded by the government. Thus, the university is self-projected as a place where knowledge and education are generously offered without expecting any rewards.

Greek universities were founded on the basis of the Humboldtian model, which promoted holistic academic education and freedom of research (Tzikas, 2006). Humboldt developed the idea of the research university which is autonomous, unbiased and independent from ideological, economic, political or religious influences, in which the role of the state is to ensure that scholars can pursue knowledge without the intervention of sectoral interests (Neave 2006, Humboldt 1810). The Humboldtian model comes into complete contrast with the neoliberal model, adopted by British and American universities, in which higher education is seen by the state as a key area for policy intervention, promotion of specific social and political objectives and above all stimulation of economic growth in a global world through its connection to the needs of the labour market (Wittrock 2006).

These two contrasting models seem to represent the contemporary understanding of purposes and quality in higher education. It seems that the Humboldtian and the neoliberal models represent the two current conceptions of higher education, the one as a public good with the emphasis on the social aspect, and the other one as a commercial service with the emphasis on the economic aspect.

In the UOA website the university's identity-making reflects similar ideological conceptions to those reflected by the AUTH website, since at the introductory point, the values pro-

moted fit the Humboldtian model. However, scrolling down the website we also find isotopies such as *quality* and *modernization* which are indicative of the university's intention to identify itself with *excellence*. According to Mavrikakis and Piryiotakis (2017) the terminology used for education has changed and terms like *equal opportunities*, *compensatory education* and *social justice* have been replaced by terms like *excellence*, *efficiency* and *competitiveness* which define educational goals in a completely different way. Passias (1995) has stated that, in the context of European policy on education, educational systems have been adapted to fit a convergent and common educational space. This type of educational policy comes in contrast to national autonomy as it promotes a supranational and international educational space.

The Hellenic University Rectors' Synod (1992) stated that Greek universities are characterized, among other things, by academic freedom, administrative autonomy and free transfer of ideas. However, in 1999, Greece as a member of the European Union, signed the Bologna Declaration which can be seen as restructuring higher education along Anglo-American ideas of higher education (Hohendanl 2011).

The example of the UOA website is indicative of transformational tendencies in higher education ideology in Greece. On the one hand, the past is celebrated, while, on the other, an attempt is made to exhibit excellence. Due to the drastic reductions of government funding towards Greek universities their priorities seem to be changing. Indicative of this tendency is the imposition of tuition fees for postgraduate studies. In these cases, the relationships developed between the organization and the potential student are being transformed resembling more those of a provider and a consumer.

Conclusions

The semiotic space of website genres seems to intersect with the semiotic space of society and culture. The isotopic level in each linguistic version cannot be interpreted and understood out of its socio-cultural context. The semiosphere of university web-mediated communication is being transformed through the interaction of its constituting parts which represent the way universities project themselves in various contexts. University online identity-making bears many similarities in Britain and the USA, but ideological conceptions on education in Greece demarcate a separate semiosphere. Recent transformations in the socio-economic situation in Greece and the country's participation in the Bologna Declaration are leading to a scaling down of this difference. The Greek university seems to oscillate between the academic and the business model. The question that arises is whether non-Anglo-American semiospheres, such as the Greek one, will move closer to one another to create a homogenized whole or whether they will resist and keep their borders intact to the extent they have the possibility to.

NOTES

1 The category of multi-source-language monolingual 'comparable' corpus, consists of two sets of texts, one originally written in language A and one of similar texts translated into language A from a variety of different languages (Laviosa 1997, Baker 1995, 1996). Zanettin (1998:1) states that 'Its value is mainly theoretical, what is investigated is the linguistic nature of translated text, independently of the source language'.

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