

## Everyday Practices and Subversions: Semiotic Analysis of the 2009 Greek Elections Through the Headlines of a Daily National Newspaper

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In this article, we will examine how journalistic discourse interferes with everyday practice and contributes to its subversion. We will show how the special event of national elections, once it becomes everyday itself, can still attract the interest of readers, interrupting the rhythm of habit. More specifically, through selected headlines of the newspaper *Eleftherotypia* we will examine how the 2009 national elections in Greece, forming a strong political event, tended to become routine through the daily flow of the press and how the enunciative strategies of the newspaper attempted to maintain the intensity of its readers' interest in this particular topic..

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### Introduction

The everyday has always been a favourite subject for semiotics. Roland Barthes (*Mythologies*), Umberto Eco (*Η σημειολογία στη καθημερινή ζωή*), and Algirdas Greimas (*De l'imperfection*) were all interested in the conjunction between meaning and everyday practice from different points of view. Nowadays, everyday practice is studied mainly by the socio-semiotic approach (for example by Jean-Marie Floch in *Petites mythologies de l'œil et de l'esprit*, *Identités visuelles* and *Sémiotique, marketing et communication* and Andrea Semprini in *L'objet comme procès et comme action*), interpretive practice (François Rastier, *Sémantique interprétative*) and the modern post-greimasian theory of intensity (Claude Zilberberg, *Éléments de grammaire tensive* and Jacques Fontanille, *Sémiotique du discours*).

If we wanted to define the main characteristics of the everyday according to the theory of intensity (Fontanille and Zilberberg, *Tension et signification*), we could say that it is time-related in the following way: the everyday, distinguished by a repetitive, ceaseless flow, is established through time and therefore becomes a habit. The “coordinates” of the everyday consist of low emotional intensity and large extensity in time. In other words, the constant repetition of the everyday (large extension in terms of time-duration) causes the reproduction of habit and this in turn results in low emotional intensity. The element of emotional crescendo is created through a surprising reversal that interrupts and causes a breakthrough

in the predictable and banal nature and pace of everyday life. In this way the inverse relationship of time-duration to emotion is constantly renewed.

The everyday is synonymous with the maintenance of routine and habit (see Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*), and the new (the creation of the new) with the surprising, with the unpredictability that breaks the continuous rhythm of everyday life (discontinuity/continuity), (irregular/regular). Something unpredictable or extraordinary, momentarily intense and instantaneous, is enough to "shuffle the deck" of everyday life and empower its continuous flow.

In this article, we will study how the special event of national elections, once it becomes everyday itself, can still attract the interest of readers, interrupting the rhythm of habit. More specifically, through selected headlines of the newspaper *Eleftherotypia* we will examine how the 2009 national elections in Greece, forming a strong political event, tended to become routine through the daily flow of the press and how the enunciative strategies of the newspaper managed to maintain the intensity of its readers' interest in this particular topic. The period under consideration runs from September 2 (the day the election was officially announced) to October 5, the day after the election. The theoretical framework within which we develop our study and the methodological analytical tool that we will use is the semiotic-narrative model of Greimas.

### **The press and the inversion of the everyday**

The press can be described as an atypical micrography of the everyday. On the one hand, its continuous and repetitive flow, as well as its predetermined structure, create a sense of familiarity and habit. On the other, the unpredictability that results from the timeliness of the news items raises the tone (increases emotional intensity) and counteracts the routine of the media agenda. News items may include unpredictable natural phenomena (floods, earthquakes), terrorist attacks with an unknown (temporal) outcome, or political events (such as elections) with predetermined duration but unpredictable results.

In any case, the main characteristic of the press is that it foregrounds, or even produces, the new, "news". There can be no headline unless there are "news". The headline is what attracts the reader.

In the case of a topic such as an election, which has a relatively long and fixed duration, the challenge for the newspaper is not just to announce the news event, but also to maintain and renew the interest of its readers, since as we pointed out above the main feature of the news item, and hence of the surprise, is that it is inversely related to time-duration. In other words, the question for the newspaper is how to maintain the interest of readers in a topic when it is no longer new.

### **The case of *Eleftherotypia***

The Greek national newspaper *Eleftherotypia* chooses to provoke and maintain the interest of its readers by converting the event of the election into a story. Day by day, it builds up the backdrop of the elections, transparently explains the plot of the story, and naturally leads up to the solution of the mystery. The newspaper prepares a narrative foundation, transforms politicians into heroes who are on a

quest for something, shapes distinct roles for them (good, bad, allies, opponents) and thus automatically transforms the news from mere information into story. As the political event enters into the jurisdiction of speech and becomes a story, it is automatically converted into something else: it acquires different, mythical dimensions and directly involves the reader, who impatiently waits to watch the unfolding of the intrigue.

Another interesting aspect of the narration of the elections that contributes to the escalation of reading interest is that of the enunciation. The newspaper presents the reality from the politicians' point of view as appearance (what it looks like) and its own version through the narration as the truth (what it is). The distance between the real (appearances) and the fiction that is constructed by the discourse (what it really is) helps the reader become part of the enunciation process and involve himself actively as he is asked to assess, evaluate and take a position in favour of what is ultimately true. The newspaper claims that it enables the reader to penetrate behind the scenes and into the sanctuary of the secret world of the elections, which is presented by the press. The reader actively shares and contributes to the (constructed) truth.

The choice of highly charged words by *Eleftherotypia* in order to present more directly and clearly its positions and accusations also contributes to the intensity of the emotional state of the reader.

In this article we will try to understand how the press, and in this case *Eleftherotypia*, stimulates and sustains the reader's interest in a political event, even when this event is no longer new.

We will see how the story of the elections is constructed with the help of semio-narrative analysis.

### **Presentation of the Greimasian narrative model**

The narrative model of Greimas, as formulated in his *Sémantique structurale* and in Greimas and Courtès' *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, is situated on the middle level of signification. At this level we find the semio-narrative structures, the central scenario we would say, with the main characters who, in a state of disconnection with the desired object or object-of-value (*objet de valeur*), acquire the relevant modalities (*want to, know [how to], be able to, must or should*) in two stages. At the preliminary stage, the hero-subject through a sender-agent (*sujet-destinateur*) acquires the modality of *want to* or *must*. A moral mandate, for example, binds the subject to carry out his main action. At a second stage the subject, after acquiring the remaining modalities (*know, be able to*) at the level of the central action, connects to the object-of-value with the help of some modal assistants (either helper-subjects or assistant-objects). During this stage, apart from the (subject or object) helpers who operate as subsidiaries to the carrying out of the central action, other competing subjects in search of the common object-of-value operate parallel (anti-)programs against the main character and his program.

The success or failure of the main action can be judged in terms of the assessment by either the sender-agent or the main subject of the action in the final

phase of the program. In case of a positive evaluation, the subject will be rewarded, otherwise he will be punished.

### **Semio-narrative analysis of the newspaper *Eleftherotypia*: The case of a non-canonical narrative scheme**

We will analyse the narrative structure of the semiotic story of the 2009 elections that *Eleftherotypia* offers its readers by applying the semio-narrative model of Greimas to the headlines of the newspaper from September 2 to October 5.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Manipulation Stage**

On 2 September, the headline *A date with the Oracle...Ministers and MPs playing...lotto with the elections* reports the preparation of the announcement of the date of the election. The Oracle automatically becomes the sender that tells Karamanlis to hold the elections. Karamanlis becomes the subject of the narrative program (NP) “announcing the elections”. Karamanlis is presented as someone who is at the mercy of greater forces that dictate to him what he should do (manipulation stage: making somebody do something).

The next day (3 September), the headline *Escape after the shipwreck – He admitted his failure, but asks us to vote for him again* can be read as follows. Karamanlis, not the Oracle, is actually the main subject of the action and the agent (*destinateur*) of the elections. He actually wants to disappear from the political scene with a clear defeat and consequently, while he is apparently announcing early elections which would make us believe that he wants to win the election since otherwise he wouldn't have announced it, in fact Karamanlis, certain of his electoral defeat, is using the elections as a pretext for quitting politics in the end. The negative outcome of the election will in fact be his own “victory”, as it is the desired outcome of his Narrative Program: the subject of this action is disconnected (/wants to be disconnected) from power. In other words, the announcement of the elections serves as an auxiliary Narrative Program that will enable the subject (modality of *being able to*) to carry out the program (to leave power / lose power); the subject can be seen as likely to consider himself worthy of punishment after bad political behaviour (punishment-evaluation stage). For Karamanlis, as presented by the newspaper, the announcement of the elections and his almost certain defeat can guarantee his way out of a failed career as prime minister.

The difference that exists between the first two headlines of the electoral period is indicative of a dual enunciation. More specifically, on the first day, the subject of the enunciation is Karamanlis and the political expediency with which Karamanlis presents the situation: the elections are something inevitable, something that he is forced to perform. On the second day we can already see a different perspective, namely the one of the newspaper; consequently, the newspaper becomes the subject of this second enunciation.

In this manner, *Eleftherotypia* simultaneously presents the act of proclaim-

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1. For the translation of the headlines we used the translation proposed by HR-NET (Hellenic Resources Network) at <http://www.hri.org/news/greek/ana/2009/09-09-index.ana.html>

ing elections as it is represented by Karamanlis (appearances) and the truth (reality) as it is presented by the newspaper. The newspaper becomes the field where two scenarios are disclosed simultaneously, the one of the politician and the one of the paper's own mediated discourse.

The presentation of the events through two different enunciations promises narrative reversals and in this way the reader's interest is maintained undiminished. In other words, there is an update of the news item and consequently an update of the relationship between time-duration and emotional intensity.

The strategy of the newspaper to present the facts through two truths / realities puts the paper itself in the position of arbitrator. If the newspaper is right, this will be revealed at the end of the elections and the newspaper will be judged (like the political candidates) by the readers or by History.

*Eleftherotypia* invites the reader to participate in the enunciation process and the reader is thus given a dynamic and interactive role.

The reader / voter will himself judge the paper and in particular the journalistic plot of the "secret plan" of Karamanlis.

### Anticipated evaluation stage (1)

On the three following days, which constitute the main part of the electoral period, the headlines *Heavy climate in ND – 'United' in the Waterloo* (4 September), *The 'last will and testament' of Karamanlis* (5 September),<sup>2</sup> and *Giving his all before he collapses – Karamanlis, in dramatic tones, attempts to reverse the defeatist mentality* (7 September) are particularly indicative. The newspaper reverses the sense of the narrative model, advancing the final result, by announcing the final stage of evaluation (Karamanlis' defeat) at the beginning of the preliminary and main action of the narrative program, anticipating the voters who will evaluate the main action of the subjects with their votes at the end of the campaign. The newspaper is thus automatically appointing itself ultimate Sender or Judge (*Destinateur*).

Like a second Oracle, *Eleftherotypia* predicts the negative outcome of the elections for the political party Nea Demokratia (ND) and consequently for its leader Karamanlis, and appeals to the judgment of its readers as to whether it has predicted successfully the results of the election.

Moreover, from the beginning of the story of the elections, the newspaper has consistently presented the Panhellenic Socialist Movement, PASOK, as the winner of the elections by announcing the results of the opinion polls.

It thus seems that there are three stages of evaluation:

- 1) The final stage of the actual voting, where the verdict of the people will declare the end of the election and will give the election result.
- 2) The opinion polls, which give a foretaste of the final popular verdict and act as a harbinger of the result.
- 3) The newspaper, which presents its own estimations and predictions.

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2. Author's translation. No translation was proposed for this particular headline.

### Stage of the action (2)

With the headlines *Karamanlis to deal with high profile cadres and nepotism* (9 September) and *ND leaves open 'windows' for hiring of its supporters in the public sector* (10 September), the paper, having already clearly marked its own position, can now analyze each candidate's modalities. The newspaper starts by dealing with Karamanlis' competitors, who are actually inside his political party. On the one hand they act as opponents of Karamanlis, since they weaken him (he *is not able to do*), but on the other hand they act as helpers (adjuvant subjects) of Karamanlis in his parallel Narrative Programme (he *wants to lose power*).

The opposite occurs with Papandreou, with headlines such as *Papandreou excludes from his party's ballots cadres implicated in scandals* on September 11 and *A "tactful" rupture* on September 12.<sup>3</sup> He is presented as someone who can eliminate his opponents/anti-subjects, who also originate from inside his political party, and therefore he can win the elections (*is able to win*). The newspaper creates a symmetrical opposition, easily comprehensible, between Papandreou and Karamanlis.

Papandreou gains another modality when he is presented as someone who *knows how to win the elections* (*Papandreou previews Barack Obama recipe and three years of austerity*, 14 September), and the alleged general weakness of Karamanlis adds the modality that Papandreou *must* win the elections. In contrast to Karamanlis, who is the negative protagonist of the elections, Papandreou is presented as the perfect candidate: he *knows how to*, he *is able to* and he *must* win the elections. We could say that Papandreou is outlined on the one hand as a mild person, familiar and accessible, but on the other as endowed with strategic thinking and forcefulness, which he does not hesitate to use where appropriate. He manages to successfully cope with adversity and difficulties and he could generally be described as "calm but strong". Governed by a spirit of democratic unity, he's always been on the side of his people.

Then, the newspaper's initial negative outlook-assessment for Karamanlis's party, Nea Demokratia, is supported and verified by a series of polls, which play the role of judge.

The paper focuses again on the rifts within the party of Karamanlis (*Masacre and collapse – Opinion polls foresee ND's Waterloo in elections*, 15 September), which functions as a modality of *is not able to win* for Karamanlis.

To the negative profile of Karamanlis will be added the modality *should not* win the elections with the headlines *The trick with the internships*, (24 September) and *Lies with victims* (25 September<sup>4</sup>), since these headlines accuse him of unethical behaviour, and finally the modality *does not know* with the headline *They are sinking and still dreaming*, (17 September<sup>5</sup>). In this way, Karamanlis is depicted as having all the negative modalities (*does not know, should not, does not want, is not able*).

3. Author's translation.

4. Author's translation.

5. Author's translation.

### Stage of evaluation (3)

The headlines of 4 October (*George's era*) and especially that of 5 October (*George's landslide victory – Karamanlis' crushing defeat and resignation*<sup>6</sup>) close the cycle of the elections and serve as the evaluation stage for the winners and losers.

The triumph of Papandreou and the crash of Karamanlis, beyond the obvious victory of the first and the defeat of the latter, places the newspaper on the winning side because of its accurate prediction. The resignation of Karamanlis also verifies the newspaper's estimation of the second parallel Narrative Program of Karamanlis (he wants to lose power by losing the elections), in which he is a winner, as he successfully achieved his real desire.

### Conclusion

*Eleftherotypia* chooses an irregular narrative scheme in order to maintain the interest of its readers and present an event that invades their daily lives. The newspaper manages to interfere in the political flux with its double plot, reversing at the same time both its narrative program and the time duration / intensity relationship.

With its subversive narrative technique, the newspaper inserts the reader in the political decision-making process by ascribing to him/her the interactive role of judge: the reader will decide, on the basis of the election results, whether the story that the newspaper told was correct. The subversive narrative schema of the elections is an enunciative strategy of the newspaper that attracts the reader's interest, as he/she is dynamically involved in multiple roles and is called not simply to be informed about the electoral outcome or to assess the potential political leaders, but also to judge the newspaper itself, through the "story" of the election as it is constructed and presented by the newspaper.

The reader thus escapes from a flat, predictable and passive reading of a normal narrative pattern, and is engaged in a subversive and deeply mediated story.

The constructed media discourse constantly manages to maintain the reader's interest in a political event with a long-term projected narrative flow and consequently with a predicted emotional crescendo.

The total set of newspaper headlines form an intertext.

Each headline has elements that are activated in the next or in some of the following headlines, at a pace that allows the creation of a puzzle that can be composed by the reader him/herself. The curiosity and suspense created about what is going to happen next has as a result the preservation of the actively participating reader's interest.

The newspaper's discourse with its enunciative strategies manages to reinvent time and to give a new twist to the flow of the reader's everyday life. Each new perspective on the same event looks like new information, which strengthens the emotional interest (inverse correlation of duration / intensity) of the reader.

*Eleftherotypia* literally operates as a media interface between people and power. The dynamic attitude of *Eleftherotypia* to openly support Papandreou and

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6. The author added the word "resignation" missing from the translation proposed by HR-NET.

criticise Karamanlis is part of the question whether the media act as helper or opponent of the candidates and therefore whether they affect the electoral body and consequently the outcome of the elections.

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