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Semiotics of cultures

Language and sign system in state institutions and NGOs: adoption of children

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Summary

Our research report is an overview of important differences between institutional and social civil sign systems concerning the adoption culture. Our actors will be the state institutions which have a department co-ordinating adoptions and NGOs. We did our best to give interesting inputs for a differentiation between the cultures of the two organisation types and to give – still a rough – idea of their culture. As a premise it is to be quickly mentioned that Children's Right Convention was approved by UNO the 20th November 1989. During the successive fifteen years adoption law would change in many countries around the world in order to fulfil the Convention goals.

In order to present a social actor in adopting people we first thought of couples who adopted or want to adopt children. Nevertheless this would have implied, at least, to interview some of them – we could interview just one couple by phone. So again, as we are outside our countries, we preferred to focus on the following social actors: state institutions – namely the government – and NGOs. They could be characterised by our previous knowledge and by Internet resources. The materials we analysed stem to a big extent from Portugal and Switzerland.

Generally spoken, the culture and sign systems in these institutions, as the public legitimates them, are highly correlated with the public sphere. Laws determined by state institutions have to be accepted by the public; NGOs' activities should be tolerated as well. We can already say that the culture of these social actors has been formed according to (civic) social movements. An example: several NGOs in Portugal, for some years now, have been trying to help those who want to adopt children and those who are, in some way, discriminated by the laws – namely homosexual couples. So, very generally, their histories and consequently their sign systems would be shaped by this social trend – to this subject we dedicated an excursus on page 22. For state institutions the same can be held: aren't they sometimes forced to review their laws or their way of dealing with the public according to civic social needs and actualities?

Furthermore, NGOs and other organizations – for example clerical institutions – intend to make their voices clear in order to increase civic society participation. Mainly, the most important idea to be caught is that of civic participation vs. disinterest. In a text (Commission 2000: 2) we read that NGOs play a relevant intermediary role between state institutions and the public. This shapes to a great extent their language and sign system.

Our methodology: adoption is first about laws, which has a very specific sign system. We tried to analyse relevant features of the sign system in the law of adoption in contrast to the features in NGOs. Further, we tried to make inferences analysing different web sites, according to their content and design. In another step we wanted to get some theses about NGOs at the library of the “Université libre de Bruxelles” – there were several – but the access to this works was denied for privacy reasons. What was useful, though, were the researches on the Internet and the interview with a Swiss couple who adopted first a girl from Brazil and some years later a boy from Ethiopia.

Contributor's presentation

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1) **Characteristics serving to describe a social actor or a society of social actors**

The different forms between **political culture** and **civic participation** in social affairs determine and delimitate territory between those who have the power [cf. Bourdieu - Social capital it is “the sum total of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual (or a group) by virtue of being enmeshed in a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationship of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1986)] and those who do not have it and consequently cannot change the course of situations. Even if the political parties are composed and chosen by citizens, through elections, laws will never regard everybody interests.

In this study we can speak about several social actors. In fact, the adoption theme is composed or shared by several communities of social actors, who diverge, more than in their goals, in theirs actions, in their speeches and sign systems. Our society of social actors are composed by three

main sub-groups: the government with its state institutions, NGOs as private institutions and NGOs as social movements.

If we consider **government** as one of these social actors, we can say that it is composed by people who make adoption laws and people who work in state institutions – Comissão de Acompanhamento da Lei da Adopção, Observatório Permanente de Justiça Portuguesa, Comissão Nacional de Saúde da Criança e do Adolescente, Comissão de Protecção das Crianças e Jovens em Risco, Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa, judges, magisters, Ministries, Social Security, etc. Several professional figures should be considered, but this would be a huge research. In Switzerland we have the Zentralbehörde internationale Adoptionen and a specialised department institution for every canton.

The **common territories** are the social places where government is working and the social symbolic place it wants to give to a child: a family; the **common histories** of all the people who work in the state institution are based on the history of the nation which is linked to the national **territory** where national **identity** and values use to shape cultural practices¹; **the environment** the employees know is different among state institutions and NGOs, because people in government may not know as well (as people who work in NGOs do) the kind of lifestyles and specific needs the children have. The other point, the more evident for us, is the **differences in the sign systems for communication** they use: government uses an institutional language whose pragmatism is no rare questioned by citizens. NGOs have a very emotional language which is often questioned by governmental organisms.

NGO's (both private institutions and associations and civic movements and not so much as children institutions) live through non-governmental money and in their daily life they try to pass an image of very strong and organized rules. On the one hand, they characterise their own practices by paying attention to specific needs and by “selling” their image as a perfect one. On the other hand they are trying to get state supports. Often

¹ All this is valid also for NGOs

they cooperate with state institutions: in Switzerland we can quote the example of the NGOs “Pro Kind” and “Emmanuel SOS”. In Portugal: Colo; Pais para Sempre ; Associação Portuguesa de Maternidade e Vida; ILGA; Opus Gay; Associação Não te Prives, Grupo de Defesa dos Direitos Sexuais; Clube Safo- Associação de Defesa dos Direitos das Lésbicas; Panteras Rosa- Associação de Combate à Homofobia; Rede Ex Aequo- Associação de jovens, lésbicas, gays, bissexuais, transgéneros e simpatizantes. They do not get money from the government as well and are more civic intervenients then the two precedents. Their budget comes from private people, mainly from the members. Even if in some cases their actions are contradictories they mostly try cooperating by interactions with all the civic society.

Institutions (NGO’s and private institutions), as they are directly dealing with situations – directly in the field – tend to be more emotional, to pay more attention to specific needs and to face children not as a number, but as individuals with different histories and consequently specific needs.

2) **Structure and composition of Government and NGO’s**

According to the Portuguese government, in the beginning of 2003 fifteen thousand children (set on the adoption list) were living in institutions or host families. In order to improve this situation, on the 22nd September 2003 a new adoption law was approved by the Portuguese Parliament. The main goals were the acceleration of adoption processes (from four years to eighteen months).

Until there adoption law was based on the following “timetable”: future adoption candidates were chosen during fifteen months; pre-adoption period was about one year and adoption processes were concluded between two and four years.

According to the new law, application for adoption should be evaluated in four months (instead of six), pre-adoption period is about six months (instead of one year), the biological parents’ approval passes from two months and six weeks to just six weeks (“*periodo para a aferição do desinteresse*”); the revocation possibility is denied, after acceptance; parents’ age for adoption

is extended from fifty to sixty years (since the difference between future parents and children it is not superior to fifty years); in the case of couples they should be at least twenty-five years old and be married at least four years and single people should have more than thirty years.

In Switzerland there haven't taken place recent changes in adoption law like in Portugal, Sweden or Spain. Homosexual couples are not allowed to adopt children and the waiting time for candidate couples is very long (about the same as during the old law in Portugal). This is not only due to the big bureaucracy which characterizes the system of state institutions – especially in adoption –, but also to the carefulness which the Swiss government dedicates to this cases. We learned from the couple (living in southern Switzerland) we interviewed, that the fear of traffic of children, which unfortunately is a widely spread activity, is big. There has to be said that the danger for parents to receive such children is bigger if they trust NGOs that make the adoption very easy and short, and expect a payment for the child. Our couple referred to the government of the canton Ticino and was very lucky and satisfied. The condition was: price 0 for the child.

Concluding, one more thing we learned during our research is that the social actors dealing with the adoption of children differentiate themselves for the **seriousness** and **correctness** of their purpose and activity. According to this, language and sign systems vary dramatically. In general, state institutions shall be more serious and to be trusted than NGOs. NGOs in Switzerland often cooperate with the state institutions in adoption matters (for example “Pro Kind”), and are therefore serious. But every appearance of NGOs on the Internet should be carefully analysed. Often a telephone can already tell if the organisation is serious.

For this paper we didn't have the time to do deeper research and had to focus on a few examples. But if we did that, also a dark side of adoption – namely that of children's traffic – would have come to light. And in that case, cultural representations would be totally different, because instead of social engagement the goal would be that of gaining dirty money.

After describing the social actor we need to understand the system he's living in. Specific features compose this system and we tried to insert adoption (culture) in four major definitions of what a culture can be.

3) **The four different definitions of “culture”**

When studying culture as a cognitive **reference frame** we should take into account some cultural themes – discriminating patterns, inferential processes concerning (other) social actor practices (this will be discussed later when referring to homosexual discrimination, under law). We should also not forget that “one of the major functions of culture in sense of a graded hierarchical set of knowledge is the justification and evaluation and sanctioning of the doing and behaviour of the members of a social actor” (Stockinger 2004: course 2).

Culture, when intended as a reference frame of knowledge and values, in state institutions dealing with adoption, is theoretically shaped. That means that theoretical knowledge is more characteristic to this social actor than practical knowledge. If we take for example the procedure for adopting a child, we will find out that it is very complex. NGOs, on the other hand, have more pragmatic knowledge inside: they don't get lost in interminable procedures which extend themselves over years. An example can be found in Switzerland: there we looked at the stately coordinated adoption (Art. 264-269c des Schweizerischen Zivilgesetzbuches) and at the NGO Emmanuel SOS. Nevertheless, there is a very pragmatic and typical professional figure in state institutions dealing with adoption: that of the social worker.

Scanning different Internet pages it was possible to detect differences in knowledge systems. In state institutions the knowledge exposed to the public is about conditions and laws; NGOs integrate their history, their mission and vision, testimonies, even pictures. We will see, talking about language, that there are very relevant differences.

The “social practice” they intend to fulfil has a common goal: to find a family to children; they have common results despite different symbols, different ways to express what they want to do (as we will see later).

But still do government and NGOs dealing with adoption have certain common knowledge: people who have studied laws and paediatrics, for example, compose them. They have similar knowledge about adoption themes, even if they do not share the same points of view and values.

Other common knowledge for both social actors comes from the co-operation they may have when living in the same country (with common problems in a national level) where it is easy to establish professional trajectories inside some kind of common professions / institutions. For example in Portugal, the director of a private institution, “Aboim em Ascensão”² was the responsible for the new adoption law elaboration, before it went to the Portuguese Parliament. This means that a responsible for a private institution also works for government, and, maybe, did this law based on the experience he had from his institution. In Ethiopia, for example, NGOs, which deal with adoption, have to be legally recognised by the government. These facts necessarily create common knowledge.

Now, the differences get enormous when we talk about **values**. First, they are very easy to detect in NGOs, while in state institutions they remain hidden; the language system one can discover in the Internet pages tells a lot.

The value systems in both government and NGOs dealing with adoption are, at the first level, those of philanthropy and moral. It is a duty of all citizens and states to support people who are not able to take care of themselves or even to survive. But the values for governments and NGOs go in slightly different directions. We know that any social actor working for the government wants to represent the population through its laws. This is the main value behind his activity: acting in a manner to keep the goodwill and faith of the people. But often the profit or personal self-actualization is the first reason for acting. For state power it is better to support children in their first years and help them to develop some skills in order to get a job than have high

² that takes care of children whose parents died, do not want to take care of them or do not have physical or material conditions to do it

levels of unemployment, criminality, prostitution, insecurity, drug consumption...

NGOs are charitable institutions, although they have a juridical status (Commission 2000: 3). Their goal is to guarantee suffering people a better life and, at the same time, to influence public opinion through emotional messages and charitable work. Their values are rigorous, well shown and have a strong sanctioning power. If someone behaves against these values, even if the government does, the sanction is strong (see more on page 13). If we take the Emmanuel organisation or Cersis, for example, their values are strongly related to Human Rights, as their aim is to give handicapped children a family (in general, most of the NGOs have the Human Rights at their centre).

When we define culture as a **problem solving resource**, adoption is characterised by a set of cognitive strategies and solutions for specific relevant needs to the social actor. This cognitive reference frame can be understood as the “constitutional forms of knowledge for a social actor” (Stockinger 2004: course 2). From this point of view a social actor needs to develop some competences in order to understand and participate in his cultural signs system, roughly speaking, in the daily life of his activity. Some of the goals are achieved by cultural heritage transmission via specialised institutions, through conventional schemata, such as laws, rules and standards. As a constitutional form we have the famous “Leitmotiv”. In state institutions dealing with adoption it is very implicit. In the NGOs we analysed it was externalised in its mission and vision. Example: *L’amour qui sauve* (slogan of Emmanuel SOS).

“«Emmanuel», une oeuvre de foi, d’espérance et d’amour au coeur de notre temps! Cette association a pour but l’adoption d’enfants non accueillis dans leur famille parce que présentant un handicap physique ou mental (par exemple: la trisomie 21, dite également mongolisme ou syndrome de Down). «Emmanuel» offre une alternative, en donnant à ces enfants une famille par l’adoption ou par l’accueil.” (vision of Emmanuel SOS).

“We believe that all children are born with the right to a loving family. Each child deserves adequate nutrition, medical care and education. Adoption is a

life-changing opportunity for children who cannot remain with their birth families.” (philosophy of World Association for Children and Parents (WACAP)).

Both state institutions and NGOs have sets of strategies: they try to promote their civic actions by publicising it on media. Here Bourdieu’s “symbolic capital” is shown. State institutional social practices have easier access to the media, being by state television or radio. NGO’s have the same access right to media access but they do not have the same budget. This is why especially NGOs promote activities on the Internet or in public places like streets, parks and sometimes in the beginning of public shows like concerts, football matches and party meetings, where they appear with sponsoring banners. In the last years, in Portugal, these kinds of actions were welcomed and, in big events, NGOs and other charitable institutions were invited to participate. This is the case of summer concerts in all the country (like Sudoeste, Vilar de Mouros, Paredes de Coura, Super Bock Super Rock and Rock in Rio), of football matches (especially during Euro 2004), and of media big events like Portuguese awards.

NGOs usually get sponsoring from football players, singers, actors and labels like Swatch. For example this watch label made a specific watch



(Swatch Fraldinhas) with children’s pictures on it. By buying one (for 60 euros) 12 euros were offered to “Ajuda de Berço”, a NGOs whose goal was to collect enough money to build a new house for children. After one year and with Luis Figo and other Portuguese’s football players’ help they built a new house and school for those children.

Also, every year, during April and May, a private institution called Cersis sells in many stores and pharmacies, for 3 euros, a specific toy called Pirlampo. At the same time Cersis asks Portuguese singers to record a single (whose themes are usually about hope, love, peace, a better world) and sold the single. In June, the received money was given to institutions “sponsored” by Cersis.



NGOs adopt more civic behaviours translated in civic manifestations, Internet forums (<http://espace-adoption.netoxygen.ch/f/index.php?idp=29>) and portals or participating in several social meetings, like anti paedophilia parades, children's day parades (in the 1st June) and other events.

Adoption as a practice shows a **symbolic capital** in the sense that not all the people can adopt children. They have to fulfil certain requirements. This means that social trajectories leading from one social position to other depend on (new) legislation. Conflict and domain relations between actors belonging to one society of actors (NGOs) and other society of actors (government) are common when we think that the adoption law in Portugal does not allow homosexual couples to adopt children³. Culturally speaking this is seen as an expropriation of symbolic capital. In fact, according to Putnam, "social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam 2000).

Talking about government, the most typical symbolic objects and realizations in this institution are the speeches during visits or inauguration meetings in social institutions. All government staff moves to those places in order to pass, through media, the idea they are very interested in social problems and they are working on it. Switzerland, being a more individualistic culture than Portugal, shows a deeper presence of NGOs and, what's even more important, a stronger collaboration with legal institutions (for example the NGO "Pro Kind" with the department of the canton Ticino⁴). So NGOs' most typical symbolic objects are their internal and external connection to other institutions, including similar NGOs. Getting international support makes them more famous and socially accepted. For example in Portugal,

³ Portuguese law just consider as *couples*, those people who are married. And according to law just heterosexual marriages are allowed.

⁴ The couple we interviewed adopted the second child through this co-operation

during the year 2002, a paedophilic scandal (that was going on since the 1970 in a state institution called Casa Pia) showed up in the media involving politics and a TV program presenter. Some Portuguese NGOs tried to connect efforts with Belgian NGOs because Europe was still waiting for the judgment of Dutroux case.

In our opinion the struggle for maintaining the symbolic capital tends to be higher in NGOs because they need it to survive.

So, for NGOs it is an important point to show to civic society that state institutions and politics are not always fair: sometimes they hide deeper social problems. As we already mentioned, NGOs play a role as intermediaries between governmental institutions and public opinion. This is part of their symbolic capital and probably their strength. As main realizations NGOs promoted and still promote some parades in main Portuguese cities streets against paedophilia. The biggest and most important one in Portugal took place in Lisbon's main street called Avenida da Liberdade⁵.

A few words about private clerical institutions: their symbolic objects are the goals they achieve without state support. When commemorating special days, those institutions invite famous people and ex-pupils as a sign of pride for their work. Those institutions are most of the time related to Church and they behave in order to help others and not to be known. Their culture is shaped by religion. Most of the people working nowadays in these private institutions are those ex-pupils who wanted to dedicate their lives helping others as one day someone helped them. Inside those social communities, this kind of behaviour is the biggest symbolic social practice an ex-pupil can show. More than a gratitude, it is seen as a life's choice for serving the other, fulfilling the Christian expectations.

Adoption, as a **historical form**, has an evolutionary dynamic linked to political parties' choices and interests (historical situations/moments/needs).

⁵ Where syndicalism manifestations, or even Euro 2004 commemorations used to take place.

Evolution concerning adoption law “has not been seen as a linear process in the sense of a “progress”” (Stockinger 2004: course 2), because of some ambiguities. The State in Portugal, in order to decrease the budget they spend with a child until (s)/he is nineteen years old (when living in a state institution) should facilitate adoption law. Nevertheless, NGOs in Portugal take more care about children’s problems and needs than the government does. Maybe because they have a deeper relationship with specific children’s problems they seem to organize and promote more activities in order to show civic society what is going wrong and ask for support, as we mentioned above. The government itself, once it is characterised by protocol and formal behaviour, is not so flexible and, because of its constitutional nature cannot so easily change its policies according to momentum needs. Changing and adopting new laws are bureaucratic processes that take a long time to be done and involve many people.

In Switzerland the opposite seems to be the case: the government wants to protect the children by not giving them to the first family which candidates and by seeking the co-operation with NGOs.

4) The characteristic sign systems of state institutions and NGOs dealing with the adoption of children

To analyse these sign systems, as they are so complex and their study would require a doctoral thesis at least (!), we decided to look more in detail at some web pages.

State institution: Zentralbehörde internationale Adoptionen

(<http://www.adoption.admin.ch/>)

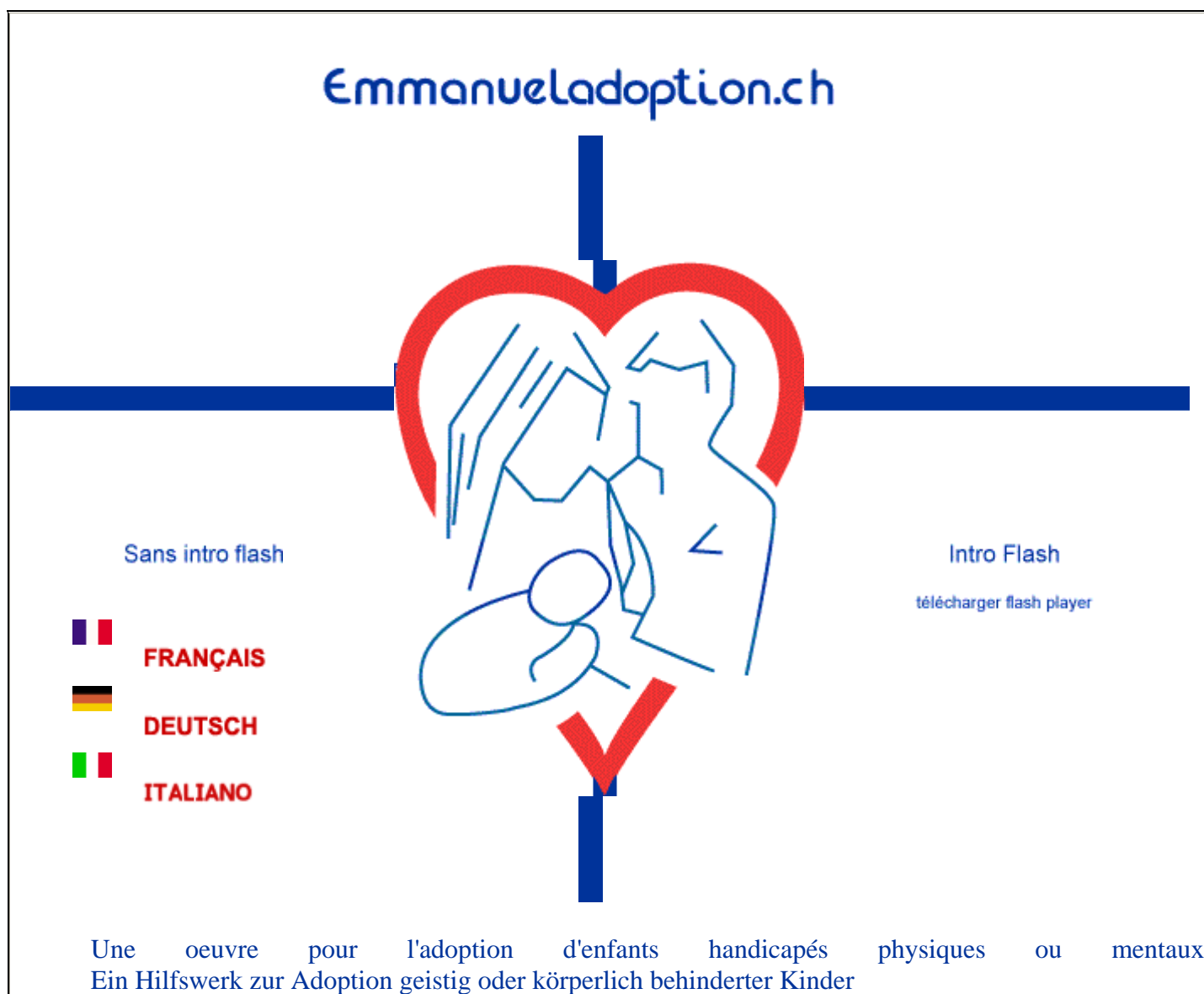
EIDGENÖSSISCHES JUSTIZ- UND POLIZEIDEPARTEMENT
DÉPARTEMENT FÉDÉRAL DE JUSTICE ET POLICE
DIPARTIMENTO FEDERALE DI GIUSTIZIA E POLIZIA
FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND POLICE

Bundesamt für Justiz
Office fédéral de la justice
Ufficio federale di giustizia
Federal Office of Justice

Bundesrain				20
CH-3003				Bern
+41	(0)31	323	88	64
+41	(0)31	322	78	64
kindesschutz@bj.admin.ch				



NGO: Emmanuel SOS Adoption (<http://www.emmanueladoption.ch/>)



What becomes evident in analysing these homepages is that, indeed, the sign systems of the two entities are very different. The web site of the state institution is beautifully designed, but very sober, in the sense that no emotions are risen. The page of the NGO, instead, rises feelings of love, protection and security. Furthermore, the mission is already “touched” in the homepage, below. The sign system of the state institution is legally characterised; the one of the NGO emotionally, although not completely

informally. The sign types composing the language are present in both sites: as logo and situated images, the state institution displays an interesting picture of the globe with a circle surrounding it; the NGO the picture of a united family, enclosed in a red heart. So both sign systems are supported by non-verbal communication with identity function.

We then see names on both sites, but a slogan only one the NGO's one. The importance of emotional communication for NGOs becomes clearer when we have a look at the homepage of the "Schweizerische Fachstelle für Adoption"⁶, a NGO with recognition from the government. You can find the following slogan: "Vieles kann der Mensch entbehren, nur den Menschen nicht." (*The man can be without many things, but not without the man*) (Ludwig Börne). A very clear message, pointing out that a family is essential for everybody. Next to the slogan there's an animated picture of a happy family joining.

When we surf on these web pages we can observe the communication and information exchange sign system. Both state institutions and NGOs have in common the enormous information sharing. There are different kinds of information, though: the state institution focuses on legal information, tasks of the different "adoption organs", available literature... the NGO informs to a big extent through another sign system: that of pictures, testimonies, activities and so on. Of course there is also factual information, but it is mixed with a stronger identity display. We are now talking of identity sign systems. They exist for both institutions, but they are differently shown and distributed. The state institution's identity sign system seems to be hidden behind the explanation of different tasks and of the contact address directly on the homepage; the NGO's identity sign system is very obvious because there is the presentation of the institution at the first place with very detailed explanations.

To discover a part of the communication and information exchange sign systems, we tested different contacts, making questions, and the outcomes were quite interesting: none of the NGOs we contacted answered, while both

⁶ Unfortunately it was impossible to display it on this document; please have a look on the web site: http://www.adoption.ch/ie_1024/index.php

state institutions did. We found that this behaviour is to be drawn back to the main interests of the institutions: state institutions are legitimated by the citizen⁷ and shouldn't fail in the communication with them; NGOs immediately detect which publics are important. A student asking questions isn't. This could also have to do with the seriousness of the NGO, but we don't want to speculate here.

The couple we interviewed adopted their first child through the adoption office of the canton Ticino:

	Adozioni 	
	AIUTO RICERCA	DSS > DAS > UTU > Adozioni
	Inoltro richiesta	Informazioni



Adozioni

Che cos'è l'adozione?

L'adozione di un minore svizzero o straniero crea un legame di filiazione (rapporto di paternità e maternità), e per porsi in modo corretto di fronte all'adozione è opportuno ricordare che occorre partire dal diritto del minore a una famiglia e non considerare prioritarie, le aspirazioni degli adulti.

L'adozione è quindi un'importante istituzione di educazione e di assistenza a favore di bambini senza famiglia.

Le condizioni spesso drammatiche in cui vive il minore nel proprio Paese non possono fare pensare che per questi bambini sia sufficiente una famiglia qualsiasi, ma sono le istituzioni che hanno il compito di individuare fra le famiglie disponibili quella più idonea.

L'autorità centrale cantonale designata dal Consiglio di Stato per rispondere a questa importante mansione è l'Ufficio del Tutore Ufficiale.

La procedura d'adozione inizia con l'[inoltro di una richiesta](#) d'adozione in seguito l'autorità cantonale allestirà un dossier sui futuri genitori adottivi da spedire al Paese d'origine del minore. Inoltre, chi inizia una procedura d'adozione deve sapere che questo comporta grande pazienza per quanto riguarda procedure, controlli e attesa e per le adozioni internazionali una certa spesa iniziale.

Allo scopo di preparare e sostenere gli aspiranti genitori adottivi e coloro che hanno già adottato, organizziamo gruppi di discussione e momenti di formazione su temi inerenti l'adozione e l'educazione dei figli.

L'adozione è disciplinata dagli art. 264 e seguenti del Codice civile svizzero e dalla Convenzione dell'Aia che

⁷ In fact we think that sign systems used by government are composed by positive and encouraged speeches.

entrerà in vigore il 1. gennaio 2003; essa ha un ruolo internazionale e ha come scopo quello di impedire gli abusi quali la vendita o il traffico di bambini o tutti i altri guadagni finanziari impropri.

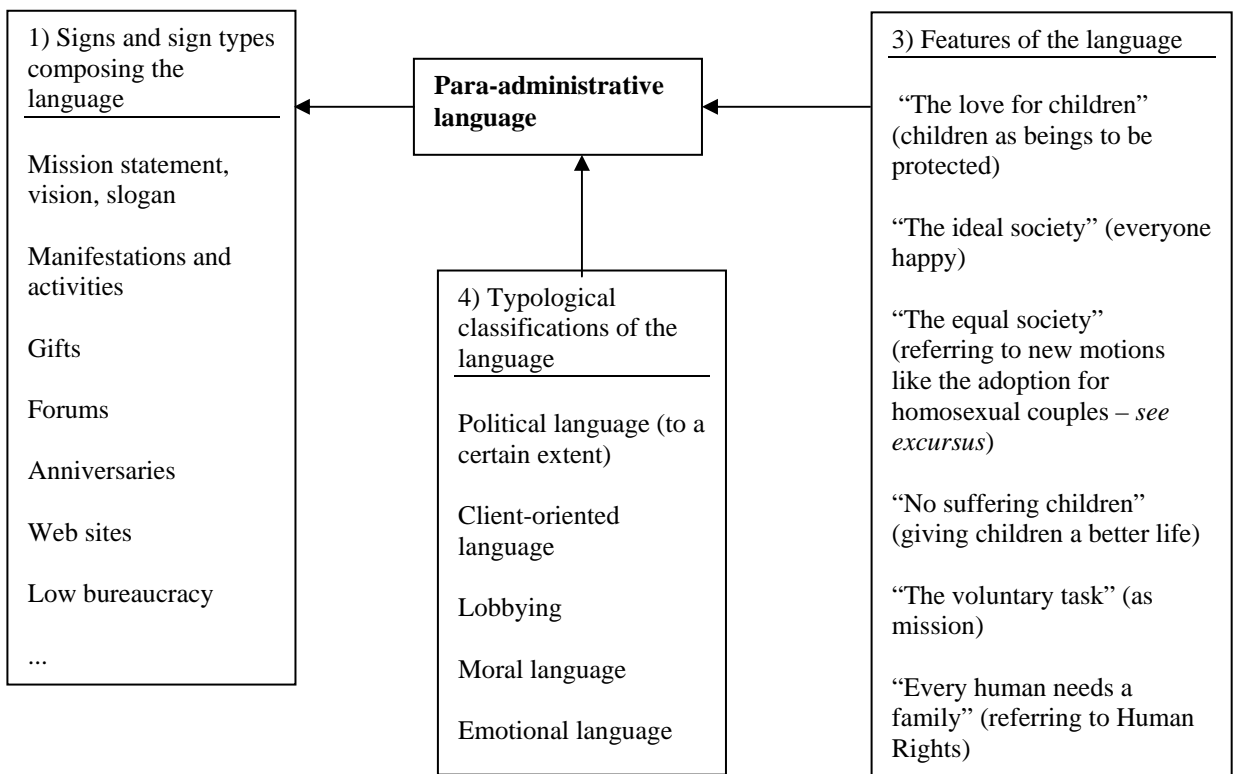
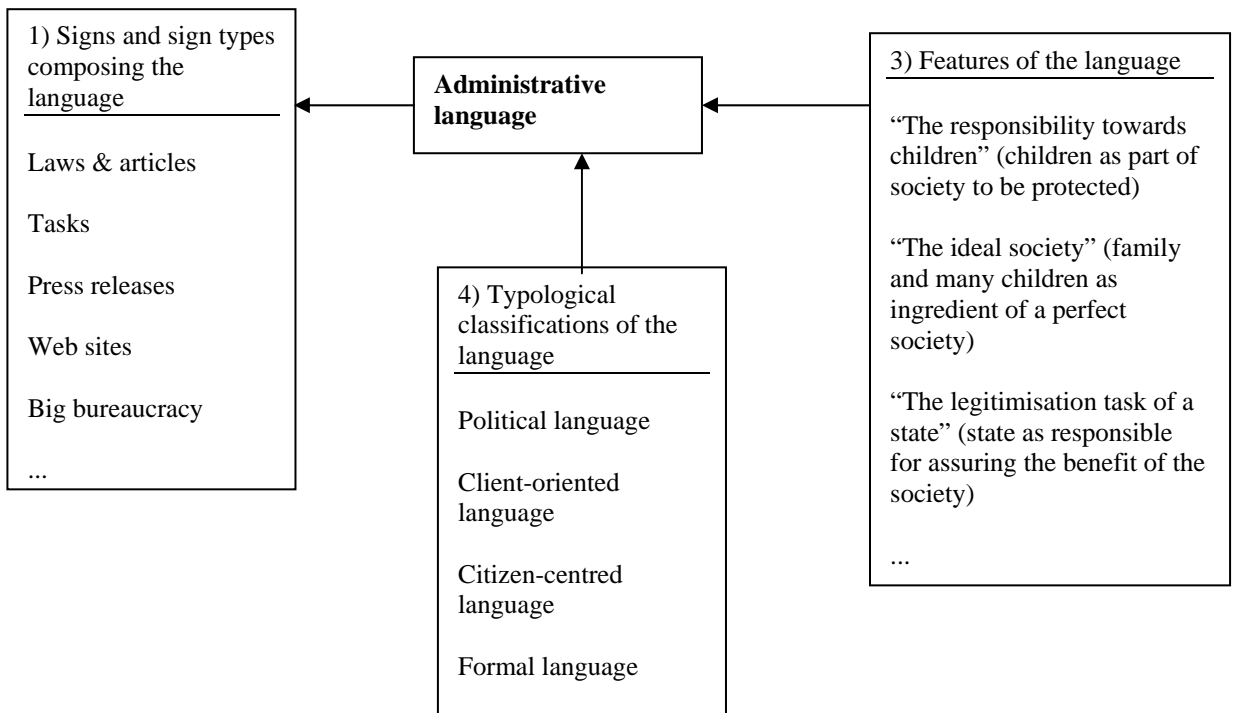
In queste pagine troverete alcune indicazioni ma chi desiderasse saperne di più può leggere il nostro [opuscolo \(pdf, 636 kb\)](#) che si può scaricare oppure ordinare dss-utu@ti.ch.

The institution, we thought, could be described as in between a state institution and an NGO. Legally it is without any doubt a governmental institution; but their sign system takes elements from both “cultures”. The long adoption processes the couple witnessed are part of the sign system of governmental institutions. But they told us that there was no coldness, that who worked there did it with his heart. Isn’t this typical of NGOs? The explanation is difficult to find without a very deep research. It is probable that the staff is strictly selected according also to motivational aspects.

Looking at the images of the homepage, we see that they are exclusively of children, while in other sites families or at least a parent are depicted. This shows the concern, behind this institution, about the well-being of the children in the first place. This utterance is covered by the testimony we got from the interviewed couple: it said that the procedures are very long not only because of the big bureaucracies, but also because the best possible family should be found for every child given free to adoption. And this takes time!

5) The language culture peculiar to state institutions and NGOs: language/speeches around adoption theme

In the following tables we tried to characterise the language systems, together with possible cultural representations, of state institutions (“administrative language”) and NGOs (“para-administrative language”) dealing with adoption.



NGOs have a more emotional speech, based on the fact that they have little support, but nevertheless they still work to improve children's situation. To do so they also base their speeches on a historical retrospective of what they have been doing during the last years. A good example is WACAP (World Association for Children and Parents) (<http://www.wacap.org/News-news.asp>), where you can find all sort of past activities and news.

Moreover, NGOs use social appealing practice forms like asking famous people to support their actions and institutions. Talking about the influence of famous people: we all know for example Audrey Hepburn children's fund or the struggle of Richard Gere against AIDS.

Sign systems used to communicate and exchange information are based in optimistic speeches by government, moralistic speeches by private institutions – especially clerical ones – and by accusative ones from NGO's. These differences should be interpreted under Bourdieu's theory of "symbolic capital". Opposition parties attack government points of view in order to get some trust from civic society. By the opposite, government is not so worried because it knows it has the power. NGOs can and tend to adopt a neutral political position, but it is always a claim/demand one.

Non-verbal communication is very important both state institutions and NGOs. The government, when reporting good results, uses a low level of gestures. When reporting opposition ideas and demands it uses more gestures in order to increase its power and to show who is right. But the speech is always intended to be pacific.

There is reason to assume that NGOs use a high level of non-verbal communication (gestures) and paralinguistic signs (voice variation) to show disagreement and to empower its words.

Identity sign systems in government is characterised by showing power decision. Gestures, utterances, voice variation, direct contact with people when it is needed or requested by protocol (politics tend to listen disagreements from people and always answer it in a positive way with a smile) are characteristics of political identity.

NGOs identify themselves with national debates, international forums and advanced ideas. They have very differently developed web sites than state institutions in the respect that emotion is arisen in every way possible and identity is shown very strongly.

Territorial sign systems are delimited in government by the representation of the nation/state power. Their power delimits also a physical territory. Object sign systems are transmitted through symbolic presents (money, computers and other furniture) government offers to institutions. When governors visit institutions they also try to behave in a more emotional level: kissing and taking children in their arms etc.

NGOs delimit territory by heritage transmission, civic society recognition parades and meetings in open public spaces. Those parades are moments of social problems explosion, contestation and discussion for different solutions.

Excursus: Adoption for homosexual couples

As this is a “hot” topic we decided to dedicate some pages to it. It is unnecessary to say that the development of this kind of politics will have implications on cultural representations within organisations dealing with adoption.

According to the Adoption Law Commission president, Luis Villas-Boas’ declarations (on the 18th of February 2004), in “O Público” newspaper: “It would be better if a child lives all his life in an institution than being educated by a homosexual couple”, because it will interfere with her/him “natural sexuality”, (almost) all the Portuguese civic society (especially homosexuals) were shocked and show disagreement in media and Internet forums (<http://psicologia.com.pt/forum/viewtopic.php?t=44>).

The main request from NGOs was that Villas Boas resigns from the Adoption Law Commission’s presidency.

Many university scholars came in public showing that psychological studies prove the opposite: through the study of some predictors, psychologists came up with the conclusion that children living with homosexual parents are as happy as children living with heterosexual couples. More, there are some scholars, defending that homosexual parents pay more attention to emotional level and well-being than heterosexual parents (whose support it is more related with material levels). Lifestyle's emotional quality it is more important that parents sexual orientation. For example, Augusto Correia, paedopsychiatrist in Lisbon D. Estefania Hospital, argues "if I can chose between a heterosexual and a homosexual couple I would chose the first one, but between an Institution and a homosexual couple I would chose the last one".

Cristina Santos, a sociologist from Coimbra's University defends the point of view that we cannot simplify the human sexuality through family environment. It is the socialization process the one it is more important. Even if there is no feature in law that forbids adoptant people because of her/his sexual orientation, it is in, our opinion, a questions of symbolic capital's lack proffering such sentences.

For the paedopsychiatrist Emilio Salgueiro, it is better to give children a heterosexual environment in order to make her/him accept the opposite sex – "evolution for heterosexuality it has a genetic basis. Baby born with anatomic and hormonal propensity for heterosexuality – what (s)/he find in the outside world will help in the gender construction. Children identity construction it is also done through the perception of her/his parents different sexual identities.

Even if some people can agree with such a statement the problem is that Villas-Boas declarations defend that there is a "natural sexuality" (heterosexual only) and that homosexuality "it is not an ordinary behaviour".

According to some opinions (internet civic society forums resources) Villas-Boas shows a natural conception of citizen's rights instead of a civic one.

In the same day (18th February 2004) the “New York Times” showed a favourable position concerning the homosexuals’ marriages in some Northern-American states (Vermont and eventually California and Massachusetts).

In many Internet forums people support the idea that sexuality is more than natural skill. It is cultural construction. The problem in Portugal, as in many other countries is related to the ancient question of cultural foundations/heritage. But we should not forget that adoption is a way children have to fulfil the civic right of having a family. “What is in question is not the private convictions of each other, but civic rights”, defended a citizen the day after in the same newspaper (“O Público”).

Villas-Boas declarations were a reaction to the Pamplona’s (Spain) Family Court decision to give a couple of lesbians the custody of two twin girls. “European legislations, like the Neerderlands, which allow homosexuals to adopt, are perverse.”

By the opposite, in Spain, the PSOE party seemed to be satisfied with the Court decision: “esta decisión significa un paso muy importante hacia la igualdad” [this decision is a big step in order to achieve equality].

On the one hand, to the Spaniard Bisexuals, Transsexuals, Gays and Lesbians State Federation “a door was open and it will not be closed anymore”. In the other hand the Spaniard Episcopal Conference (CEE) reaction was opposed: “It is not possible to qualify as discriminators laws that deny adoption by homosexuals; what should be take in account is that it is unfair a children adopted in such situation”.

Luis Zapatero, at the time candidate to the Spanish government, agreed with the personal character civic rights extension to all couples, no matter their sexual orientation”.

According to the social psychologist João Manuel de Oliveira, this reaction shows deeper groups prejudice. The social psychologist also point out that homosexuality was withdrawn from the Diagnostical and Statistical

Manual for Mental Disorders, in December 1973. Two years later, the American Association of Psychology supported that decision.

Catarina Gomes, a common citizen wrote in 19th February 2004, in “Jornal de Notícias” newspaper that none can guaranty in state institutions we have a heterosexual environment. And to support this idea we should not forget the paedophilic case in Casa Pia.

Cristina Santos, president of the *Não te Prives- Grupo de Defesa dos Direitos Sexuais NGO's*, “the Portuguese society as not evaluated as much since five years ago, the Portuguese state was condemned by the Human Rights European Court, after having taken a small girl from her homosexual father.

Sara Martinho, president of the Rede Ex-Aequo NGOs, adds that adoption by homosexuals is defended by the American Association of Psychiatry, American Association of Psychology and by the the American Academy of Psychiatric.

6) The intercultural dimension in the state institutions and NGOs

The intercultural dimension in international adoption is very strong. As we see it in the answer we received in the following mail (at the bottom), very different peoples, countries and institutions are involved. Ms. Bär takes that as a reason why a sign system proper to this Swiss state institution hasn't probably developed.

Sehr geehrte Frau Waldburger

Wie Sie vielleicht wissen, existiert die Zentrale Behörde des Bundes im Bereich Internationale Adoptionen erst seit 2003. Der Web site <http://www.adoptionen.admin.ch> entnehmen Sie die wesentlichen Funktionen der Zentralen Behörde des Bundes und der Kantone. Sie werden feststellen, dass die Kantone in erster Linie für die Beratung und Betreuung der gesuchstellenden Personen zuständig sind. Sie müssten folglich dort nachfragen.

Die 2. Frage können wir lediglich mit einer Vermutung beantworten: Eine spezielles Zeichensystem hat sich in diesen 2 Jahren vermutlich nicht entwickelt: Es sind zu viele verschiedene Personen, Länder und Institutionen

im In- und Ausland involviert.

Freundliche Grüsse

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About globalisation, as expected in the age of globalisation, promoting civic debates is a way to promote national and international understanding and communication. As we have seen, this is the role of NGOs. Further, globalisation is a big change especially for organisation which deal with adoption: canals in the whole world can be found (for example in Brazil, in Ethiopia or in Cambodscha) communication and information flow around the globe is possible (Gallino 2000: 45). This is a big challenge for intercultural communication. That`s why research about language and sign systems especially in organisations with international activities – like the ones we`re analysing here – should be enhanced.

Unfortunately also the traffic of children finds easier access through the all pervading global systems.

Conclusion

The research report we presented was an elaboration of ideas about possible sign systems in state institutions and NGOs dealing with the adoption of children. This work could be a starting point for a deep and systematic research. As you will have seen, we lacked of systematic information and precise categorization. However, we think that the inputs gained from our research can be useful.

Basing on Segall's theory that "humans are producers of culture, and, at the same time, our behaviour is influenced by it" (Segall et al. 1999), we discussed that adoption law has to change according to social movements and that both state institutions and NGO dealing with adoption of children are active actors in the process. As the culture of these institutions is evolutionary, language and sign systems have to adapt to new patterns. As an example we showed the answer of the Swiss institution (page 25) which says that it is difficult to determine a sign system because a lot of people, countries and institutions are involved in daily exchanges (we feel to add) both inside and outside the country.

During the work we noticed that enormous differences exist between state institutions and NGOs in Portugal and Switzerland. In the latter country, the government seems to pay particular attention to the protection of children and to the avoidance of children traffic. As we sent an email with questions to the Swiss office (state institution) for adoption, they said that their institution has highly social goals. In Portugal the government seems to promise more than it can hold. As a consequence, people tend to address to NGOs with their requests; in Switzerland NGOs co-operate strictly with the government.

For that reason it was for us a challenge to define a unique language and sign systems valid for the cultures of the two institutions and the two countries. But we hope that some common trends and tendencies could be recognised and outlined.

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