

**European Masters
in Intercultural Communication (EMICC)**

SEMIOTICS OF CULTURES
(Instructed by Peter Stockinger)

The Notion of:
***“NGOs recruiting volunteers for development traineeships or
social projects via their websites”***

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1. Summary

This study is done in order to have semiotic point of view to the special kind of communication practiced in the websites of NGOs. Chosen examples come from two different countries, but still from the same field of action. These two NGOs have information distributing and recruiting purposes to fulfil via their communication and on websites one can encounter with both. Special flavour comes from the fact that our NGOs have certain features as social actors and the field where they influence and contribute is open for many ideologies, debates about values and interculturality numerous different sign systems.

To approach our social actor three key concepts were chosen. First `culture` to define our NGOs as ones and more precisely via these four: Culture as system of common knowledge and values; culture as problem solving resource; culture as symbolic system and culture as historical form with evolutionary dynamics. Second concept to use as a tool when defining our notion was `social actor`. By doing this an overall picture of our NGOs is build while their environments, territories, objectives and needs are processed with the special interest on sign systems via which they operate.

Third concern of ours was to clarify linguistic and semiotic perspective to be able to elaborate sort of a scale in purpose to analyze those websites. No other instrument than our own personal interpretations would fit better into this task. Our arguments are based on these grounds and when possible, deepened by our personal experiences. By systematically going through the websites we concentrated on visual and text semiotics above all. Finally, overall picture and impression is constructed by combining these. The sketch of a scale used can be seen as subtitles in the chapter five, to make it clearer for reader to follow. Individual thinking is emphasized in analyses, but group work benefits we found profitable when producing conclusions. By adding comparative dimension into it, we wished to reach some agreement about common field, common sign systems, shared by these NGOs despite of cultural differences.

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2. Introduction

In this present work, we will study the NGOs recruiting volunteers for development traineeships and social projects via their websites. This is done from semiotic point of view, concentrating on sign systems in analyses. As very important actors in the current world, NGOs have a great role to play in the field of developmental work. They act to reduce inequalities. To reach this aim, they have to call for the work force of the young people. We wanted to find out, how they communicate this to public. How do they motivate them to go and work abroad? What are the specific features of their communication systems?

After defining the NGO culture, the NGOs as social actors and relevant parts of linguistic and semiotic approaches, we will focus on the description and analysis of the communication means of the two NGOs. Through comparisons, we will try to draw general picture of these types of social actors and sign systems they have adopted and now use for communication purposes.

The choice of the topic is linked to the fact that two of us have been “customers” or in other words, volunteered in this type of exchange programmes. As we consider, we have got a closer relationship with NGO’s and we wanted to take an advantage out of this. As previous trainees, the field is familiar to us so we can benefit from not having a sort of “double intercultural effect” sometimes resulting as misinterpretations. By knowing both the mother tongue (as a sign system) and NGO’s language (as another type of sign system), we can combine our competencies to decipher their messages.

Trough our experiences, we can point out the impressions of the visitors / consumers / information seekers reading the website. Today, we have enough distance to our former experiences to understand better our motivations to apply. We can analyse the process of attraction transmitted by the NGOs communication/advertising.

We can also make comparisons between the message conveyed by the website and the reality on the field. We are also familiar with the actors present in hierarchy of NGOs as social actors. We know by personal experience the staff of the organisation, the application process and the departure preparation.

3. Definitions and key concepts

a. Culture

To speak about the culture of the NGOs sending young people abroad for a training period, definition of the culture has to be discussed first. After that the link between these theoretical definitions and the reality of the social actor of these organizations can be drawn. To find a definition to an abstract and universal notion as “culture” is not easy. There are more or less as many definitions as researchers on that field. As we can not enumerate all of them, we will keep the most common ones as the basis of our study. There are four main approaches to the question of, what a culture is:

1. The first one considers a culture as a system of common knowledge and values which are supposed to be more or less common to a group of people living together. This latter is considered as a social actor in the domain of the human science as in the semiotics. In that sense, the NGOs have a specific culture. They defend a certain number of values which are changing in function of its aim. It can be the protection of the environment, the help of children, and the prevention of the war and so on. The values are rather humanistic ones. They always defend somehow the equality between humans. They advocate the Human Rights, the world peace and protection of noble causes. In our case, they believe in the efficiency and the motivation of students to go abroad to help during a given period.

The knowledge is also shared among these groups. They have knowledge from the field first. They are supposed to know the needs and the way to fulfil them. Then they have to know partners on the field and keep them always present when playing the role of an intermediate. They also have to know the young they send abroad to provide efficient workers to their partners and to answer to the expectations of the volunteers. The NGOs have to teach some things to the volunteers to make them aware of the realities, to enable them to be more efficient in an unknown context. The knowledge is graduated: the members of the headquarters are in most of the cases more informed than the trainees.

2. When considering culture as a problem solving resource, we can identify that they provide answers and solutions for these needs:

- The globalization issue: some countries have many problems to develop whereas others become richer and richer. To balance the system and regulate inequalities, NGO are there.

- On another side, NGOs are responding to a demand of developmental work force. They bear on the motivation of the volunteers offering their professional competence.
- They meet with the needs of the poorest thanks to technical knowledge. They help to organize place, housing etc.
- NGOs answer to a need of solidarity and humanity in the Western society. They give to the volunteers an opportunity to act concretely for a better world.
- A better understanding of the Third World cultures and developmental problems. Our NGOs are there to fulfil those needs by offering solutions to them. Their actions consist of a set of strategies aiming at satisfying the given needs. From one generation to the other, the volunteers are giving testimony by transmitting their experiences on the field. The different NGOs have here a significant role to play.

3. Then, one can understand a culture as a symbolic system. It can distribute hierarchical positions. For the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, a social actor lives in a structured and structuring space. Here, the NGOs are included in the huge family of the solidarity actors, who have their own social field and inside of it own rules and further more values and knowledge, relations and reputations as capital.

4. At last, culture has also been defined as an historical form with an evolutionary dynamics. In that case, NGOs are the answer given to the growing inequalities of the world. Since the end of the 18th century (and the creation of the International Red Cross Committee), they tried to be present in the areas throughout the world when needed. The NGOs we are going to study further have been created decades ago, after the Second World War. At this period, many countries were in the process of decolonisation and NGOs came to help populations to cope the growing difficulties encountered in the everyday life. They collected more and more data concerning the fields and the appropriated manners to act. This knowledge is transmitted via the members as a common heritage and it is accumulating by nature.

b. NGOs as social actors

To combine concept of a social actor and give some common characteristics for NGO as one, it is useful to gather the whole picture piece by piece. Division of core elements of a social actor is filled with characteristics of our NGOs in following:

Common knowledge and values:

In the field of developmental work, these NGOs have practical and specialized knowledge e.g. about social, technical, environmental and psychological issues concerning the target country. To success in the projects they launch and exchanges they organize, many type of specialized knowledge is needed. Inside of the NGOs there are differentiated actors, who are responsible for certain domains. These are communication, finance, administration, recruitments, management and so forth. Since NGOs can be seen as organizations, they share common needs and objectives with many types of organizations. The specialized knowledge comes from the fact that NGOs, even if intertwined with economical issues, are not there to make profit, but act as mediators between the willing volunteers and chosen receivers.

As social actors, NGOs promote, transmit and advocate shared values. These are many times released and published, because values construct the main ground for their identity. Repeated as leitmotiv these values are transmitted via communication means. In the respect of human dignity, these values follow human rights and are humanistic in this sense. Most commonly found are solidarity, equality, respect among people and protection of the weakest.

Common activities, needs and goals:

Besides all the activities around exchange programmes, these type of NGOs organize often awareness raising campaigns, offer lectures, work shops and seminars from their special field of interest and just spend some shared time with like-minded in the form of social gatherings. Needs of these NGOs are not so easily listed, but at least finance for their actions have to be covered some way. Also volunteers can be seen as their basic need and on the other hand they need partners to cooperate with. Goals go hand in hand with values and can be seen as certain succeed projects with the help of volunteers and on the other hand as a growing number of people who have intercultural experience and maybe better understanding about global issues, other cultures and different ways of thinking and acting.

Common language and sign system for communication and interaction purposes:

Own type of jargon might develop among the actives in the particular NGOs and it can serve its purpose to identify this social actor as unique and special one. Sometimes people talk about their NGO as “a second home” and got the feeling of belonging, when sharing the same interest on topics and being able to create own collective point of view to these issues.

Common realizations, products, symbols:

As a manifestation of NGOs existence, the websites are a good example. It is forum to be seen and heard and nowadays maybe the most effective one in a means of need to be founded among information seekers. So it is important to be matched, when potential volunteer seeks his/her way in the World Wide Web. Others and more traditional forums are also still useful and many times you see these NGOs visiting schools, publishing, advertising in a newspapers and more targeted in a special publications in their field. Sign system in the form of symbols can indicate the membership and help recognizing the others belonging to the same group. Symbol could be e.g. the logo printed in clothes, bags, pins &c. and often sold on purpose to finance action. Double purpose of these products is anyhow inevitable.

Common territories

If we consider the web sites as arenas, territories and environments of certain types of knowledge or competencies; capital even – the question of closure and opening of the territory is essential. The most evident form of delimitating ones own territory is to give access only for members or already chosen applicants by restricting or denying access in those sites by asking password. To become a full member of these NGO's or even to be invited to access their territory as a new chosen volunteer, the selection process with its interviews and matching with certain standards serve as gatekeeper (or can be seen as one) for their territory.

Their headquarters of course is one of restricted areas of their territory. In this place, they can express their values, power and organise their action. Most of the times, this place is restricted to the normal actors. The hierarchy is officially based there. It can be opened to the externals for some occasions (like seminars, meetings and so on), but for these occasions, the accepted people are selected. The territories of NGOs are also virtual nowadays: thanks to Internet, they have a bigger area of action. It is a good channel of communication for them. It has no geographical boundaries and it appears to be accessible to everyone. Going further in the exploration, one still discovers restrictions. Some information is only available for the people having a key code. The share of the restricted territory is a proof of belonging fully to the structure.

Common histories, traditions and experiences:

All these NGOs are more or less directly descendants from common ancestors. The first comparable organisations providing help to the weak people can be found from afar past. At the 14th century `Saint Vincent-de-Paul` was helping the victims of the war by providing them medical first aid. Now, the techniques and the means have changed but the tradition remains. Most NGOs have been

created in the last half decade. Born during the wave of decolonisation, they shared through the time the same experience. Questions about their role and efficiency have been risen. During the conflict of Biafra for example, the “French doctors” became very famous but afterwards their action became very controversial subject. The issue of their political implication came out then. Since, NGOs had to answer to many critics and to define common ways of acting, co-operating and expressing themselves.

Common relevant environment

NGOs chose privileged places to act. On the field, they have to be present in the needing countries and to be in the right place at the right time. Concerning the management of their image, they have to make coherent choices. As actors of the international solidarity, they have to be shown in some media and not in other. For example, their advertisements are placed in strategical places.

c. Linguistic and semiotic approaches

Scientific field and methodology of semiotics concentrate on studying and constructing theories about signs, sign systems (=semiospheres) and processes. Signs have their internal organization and their function in a communication process to be revealed and identified by semiotics. Broadly defined, a sign is any object that signifies something to a cognitive agent (let it be a human, an animal or artificial one such as a computer programme). To signify and carry information or in other words to be “information loaded”, a sign has to be perceivable and knowable, so that it can have cognitive, pragmatic or emotional relevance to an agent.

Not to forget here, is the fact that any object can and do support a diversity of potential information, according to functioning of that particular object in the life of an agent. Meanings produced by interpreting the signs may have for example economic, technical, social and emotional characters. All those things have to be understood with respect to agents’ knowledge, values, interests and needs.

To define an agent more precisely here, it has to be remembered that these cognitive and intentional entities, besides having competence to interpret and use signs, must also be able to produce sign systems for communicational purposes. Once again it can be a person able to understand and use signs and further more participate to sign orientated communication. It also can be any social group, animal society and artificial or even imagined cognitive agent.

In a context of a sign, a content part (signifié in French) and an expression part (signifiant in French) can be distinguished. Content part refers to typical features or themes, typical narratives

and typical rhetorics. Whereas expression part refers to typical perceptive features (e.g. visual and sound) concretised in typical information products and services. Quoted to aforesaid our NGO's, their contents and manifestations on their websites can be read as a certain type of system of signs and as a certain type of advertisement language.

Through this work, we chose to take a closer look into NGO's of a certain type and the way their websites are presented by our different mother tongues. This was merely to take into account the fact that sign systems are always cultural and historical. This way, communication presupposes a so called cultural background to be fully understood in the names of cultural reference systems. In any case, the phenomenon of intercultural communication exists in our work, since all sorts of professional and specialised way of communicating need to be interpreted via translation and appropriation.

Our purpose is to try to approach and understand the notion of "NGOs recruiting volunteers for development traineeships or social projects via their websites" in a relevant social, cultural and historical context of communication. In the class, we saw a broad selection of diverse and specialised semiotic approaches to make research and investigations upon signs and sign systems. These are:

- text semiotics
- visual semiotics
- socio-semiotics
- psycho-semiotics
- media semiotics
- semiotics of advertising
- semiotics of architecture, music etc.

For our purposes, approaches of text, visual, media and advertisement semiotics offer the most suitable working tools to "read" (and sense) through the webpage advertisings and appearances of the two intentionally chosen NGO's.

Signs have differentiated functions and status for their constructor, user or interpreter. Signs systems used for communication and information distribution purposes are different from the ones that concentrate on fulfilling an identity function. Through our work, we also want to take a closer look into sign systems that are used for reproduction of these NGO's and delimitation of a territory on which they are operating.

The functioning of sign systems used for communication purposes can be understood with the help of typical genres of general rhetoric. In our case, information processing in those web pages

goes via describing, confirming, narrating, explaining, counselling, selling images, advertising, and in some cases even warnings are to be recognized. In order to identify their function, the two chosen NGOs represent their habits by using logos, slogans and mission statements throughout their sites. Reproduction purposes are revealed through references and stories, which are an excellent way to learn about their cultural heritage, roots, historical foundations, former experiences of former volunteers etc.

Sign systems (like the ones we found on the web sites of our NGO's), are used, elaborated, preserved and learned by people with common interests, needs and desires. In this sense, an NGO as a social actor is formed by these communicating people (who interact, circumscribe their identity, reproduce themselves, delimitate their territory and also reflect themselves, their destiny and their possibilities). All of this is made visible in their web sites.

4. Characteristics of our social actor

a. MaaIlmanvaihto ry (=ICYE Finland)

MaaIlmanvaihto ry is a non-profit and non-governmental organization practising international cultural youth exchange and offering versatile voluntary work possibilities in over 30 countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe.

This Finnish subgroup of ICYE (= International Cultural Youth Exchange, with its headquarters in Berlin) was established in 1958 and is one of the 35 member committees of ICYE International. During the first decades, all its functions were closely associated with church and parish and the ones who participated on exchange programmes were mostly students. Nowadays, MaaIlmanvaihto ry keeps up a non-aligned image and is open for everyone.

Two permanent staff members (the General Secretary and Programme Coordinator) coordinate approximately 400 members and many types of activities. As it is usual in these types of NGO's, some former programme participants have remained within the organization and help with organizing activities on a voluntary basis. Functions are organized so that the board of ICYE Finland defines guidelines and is assisted by several working groups: PR group, contact group, finance group, interview group and training group.

MaaIlmanvaihto ry sends and receives altogether 30-40 volunteers per year. If we compare it to international organizations, it is a relatively small one. This has some advantages, like the possibility to build up an image of taking every participant as an individual whose personal wishes can be taken into consideration very well. Worldwide, ICYE has organized about 13.000 exchanges since 1972, and this is how far the reliable statistics can reach.

For who is it for? MaaIlmanvaihto ry is "open for everyone". The participant can be a worker, unemployed, student or just graduated, someone needing of sabbatical year, male or female, city or countryside person. There are no age limitations except in the special Youth Programme funded by European Union (Part of European Voluntary Service EVS) where participants must be between 18 and 25 years. Special training or language skills are not required - but flexibility, courage and strong initiative are highly appreciated.

Activities are mainly financed by the participation fees of outgoing volunteers and the grants allowed by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Ministry of foreign affairs. Cost of programmes are 4300€for one year and 3500€for half a year.

ICYE International has a consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council, operational relations with the European Commission, collaboration with the World Council of

Europe, and a membership in CCIVS (Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service).

b. Jeunesse et Reconstruction

Most of the following information was taken from the website or from questions asked directly to the staff of the headquarter via e-mail.

The French association chosen is called “*Jeunesse et reconstruction*” (youth and reconstruction). Created in 1948, it primarily aimed at managing the work of some volunteers after the second world war in the reconstruction context of Europe. It is a non-profit organisation following the French law from 1901. Today, it is an international volunteers exchange association for short or long term stays. It prepares international meetings around some local development or animation projects.

In the headquarters, nine employees regulate the administration’s matters. Helped by other volunteers, they coordinate the international and national partnerships, the trainings, and the coherent development of the association. On the field, the area delegates are responsible for the practical settings. An area delegate acts like an intermediary between the association and the local partner. Then, the animators work on the field with the volunteers. They usually receive a previous training given by the association and are motivated by international projects.

The organization structure is defined as follows: The Honor President is Kemal Abiska, he takes the decisions with the other members of the administration council: Vincent Lermuzeau, the President, Philippe Cauche and Jean Montout, the Vice-Presidents and Sabine Lagardere, the General Secretary. Concerning the finances, Christophe Droal is in charge of the treasury. Other members of the administration council are Christiane Andler, Véronique Thiebault, Leendert Vandenberg and Kamel Isselman.

The association became bigger and bigger year after year. Nowadays, it is a huge actor on the field of NGO’s working with volunteers. It organizes many exchanges between French and foreigners. Here are the statistics published on the web site for the running year:

Exchange statistics By continent for Jeunesse et Reconstruction project			
1989 Inscription for participant			
Northern America	Europe	Asia	
Sent	58 Sent	355 Sent	114
6.9%	42.26%	13.57%	
Received	25 Received	967 Received	111
2.18%	84.16%	9.66%	
Southern America	Africa	Oceania	
Sent	75 Sent	237 Sent	1
8.93%	28.21%	0.12%	
Received	0 Received	46 Received	0
0%	4%	0%	

Jeunesse et Reconstruction organizes sending and welcoming programs. At the beginning they worked mostly with European countries, but nowadays, they are working on a larger field and are dealing with more partners throughout the world.

Area	Welcomed in 2002		Send in 2002	
	Short term	Long term	Short term	Long term
Southern Africa	0	1	0	7
Northern America	21	0	23	0
Southern America	4	15	128	18
Asia	101	2	81	7
Western Europe	268	1	358	0
Central Europe	197	0	82	0
Northern Africa	9	0	114	0
Oceania	0	0	0	2
TOTAL	600	19	786	34

In 2002, Jeunesse et Reconstruction sent 1697 young volunteers from 28 countries. The short-term stays represent 869 volunteers, who have been sent in 44 countries. In all these countries, the association keeps contacts with local partners who have to elaborate the projects and to provide a concrete frame (working condition, shelter, food and so on).

Today, the volunteers appear to be interested in the faraway destinations. These destinations represent an increase of 20% from 2002. This increasing rate is due to a more and more growing

number of volunteers going to Southern America, Asia and Central and Southern Africa (whereas the numbers of volunteers going to Central Europe, Western Europe and to North Africa countries have lost more than 20%: they represent 64% of the volunteers for 2002 against 85% in 1999).

Here is the repartition of the destinations of the short-term stays from 1999 to 2002:

Area	1999	2000	2001	2002	2002, % of the total
Southern Africa	21	64	64	83	9,55
Northern America	30	21	20	23	2,65
Southern America	52	20	31	128	14,73
Asia	20	55	80	81	9,32
Central Europe	125	107	75	82	9,44
Western Europe	459	440	347	358	41,20
Northern Africa	106	125	93	114	13,12
TOTAL	813	832	710	869	100%

“Jeunesse et Reconstruction” works in partnership with many associations situated in fifty five different countries on the five continents. The association works in partnership and has been recognized by the French Ministry of Youth and Sports as well as the Ministry in charge of the Tourism. It is a full member of the CCSVI (UNESCO), of the Alliance of European Voluntary Service Organisations, of Cotravaux and of ICYE. Jeunesse et Reconstruction works with this latter for all the long term stay. The public is mostly quite young one. The age doesn't appear like a selective criteria but the legal age to participate goes from 18 to 30 years old. The average age of the volunteers turns around 20 to 22 years old. The majority of the volunteers is constituted by women. The target of the communication strategy is every individual who is willing to live an intercultural experience. Those results can be explained by the fact that young people have probably more time to spend (during the scholar holidays for example) and have less obligations (no children, no stable job...). Furthermore, they are generally in good health and are very motivated to live some experience abroad. Most of the time, they come from a wealthy background and have a family who can financially support the expenses of such a project. A member of the association explained to us that is was often young students who gave up their studies for one year to live a different experience by deciding to go abroad through this structure. But he also told us that the public varied very much and was heterogeneous.

5. Semiotic analyses of contemporary identity of our social actors via their websites

a. www.maailmanvaihto.fi / www.icye.org

Visual semiotics:

Logos

Logos are the first things to look at, when entering the webpage of organizations. For some reason the logo of Maailmanvaihto ry (Picture 1) is visible only partly. The main picture is full, but the texts surrounding it must be fulfilled by guessing – of course it is obvious that the words are the name of the organization and “mother organization”. From round form in the middle one easily gets the idea of globe and those four arrows pointing to four directions would tell their story of organizations ability to reach in every point of the compass.



Picture 1

Logo of international ICYE (Picture 2) has nothing much in common with the first logo. The shape of circle brings also the globe in mind and longitude lines confirm the idea. Choices of colours in these two are the most differentiating part – black and blue combination versus light lila and dark pink combination.

Picture 2



First impression

First two words to read, when entering the website are “vaihda arkea” (change your everyday life) with exclamation mark right behind. Logos start to flash for a while and to continue one have to choose the language of instruction between Finnish, Swedish and English. Grayblue background is very calm and simple. First and main information page is illustrated by photos of smiling people – from children to senior. Pictures are in black and white only, which also keeps placid image up. To carry on to the basic information or more detailed one, the rough index helps with the main topics. “Encounters and culture shocks” is the title for beginning paragraph and what could more appositely make the reader convinced that the text is exciting and interesting enough to read on and surf the site more thoroughly.. First impression was by word saying: captivating.

Amount of information

All I could imagine to ask -to get the basics and also needed information to apply- was included. Even at some points skipping the historical details and parts with organization’s collective memoirs was necessary to stay in more relevant material when collecting information. Individual pages are not too full of information and links serve as a gate to another layers and depths I would say. As a Finnish version (identical with Swedish and English ones) is somewhat a bit longer what comes to amount of words, but the quantity of information contents of course is constant. The font and size are comfortable and there is no need to move forward to see what is ment to be written there – this tells me in away that amount of information per page is user friendly.

Colours

As mentioned before the calm and peaceful impression almost makes even the light colours totally invisible. Still there are colours, but black texts on white ground together with black and white (to be precise there is blue shades) pictures are playing the major role in colour world of this site. Blue colour from the logo is used as a background for index balk and bright orange indicates and highlights some of the titles and organization’s contact details (which are available in every page). Two person portraits are in colours and that way get more attention and produce warmer, alive impression.

Movement

After the intro page (the one that opens straight with www address) there are no moving objects or animations in this site. Tranquil and harmonized overall image of this site does not need or miss any that type of attractions or entertaining elements.

Pictures

Pictures 3, 4 and 5 are chosen here from the number of eight all together. They present three different types of illustration material included to the site. Picture 1 is copied from the first page and is kind of a face of the introducer for the first things that you find out from MaaIlmanvaihto ry. Life lived is encompassed in the modest, contented smile in the face of this Asian senior. With the black and white somewhat timeless picture goes the slogan “*take your chance and change your daily life – once you are granny and gonna need something to remember!*”. He could be the kind of interesting person –somewhere out there in the world- that one could get to know better, if just has enough courage to take her/his chance and go.

Picture 4 is more active and shows former volunteer in surroundings and context of interest for the one who seeks adventure, different ways of life and is ready to give his/her contribution to the chosen society. African woman in the background, dry sunny weather and traditional way of carrying e.g. food supplements tell their story about another world. You just get the impression it is not something to be found from around the corner – you need to go further. And much further. Even if working, situation seems to be pleasant and clothing of the volunteer reminds the viewer that developmental work is hardly sitting in front of the computer in a suit, but rather physical work where one is not suspect to get annoyed if hands get dirty.

Picture 5 is a caricature about encounter between the foreigners/others and from physical appearance a bit different volunteer making contact. As in caricatures usually the main point is highly exaggerated and so is the case in this one also. Creatures are at least seemingly friendly and welcome the arriving person.

Picture 3



Picture 4





Picture 5

Professionalism

Site gives an impression of a touch of professional visualist or webpage composer. From the bottom of the pages user can select link to the site designer “nettidee” and find out that so is the case. In quantity/quality and rational/emotional comparisons the quality overwhelms the quantity and reasonable material is clearly majority with some humoristic cartoons every here and there.

Text semiotics:

Lexicon

Language is down on earth and reveals the message to reader very easily – not much wordplay is to be found. Points come out clearly and explicit subtitles help to take a glance straight to the relevant topics without a need to read through the whole text. Lexicon in mission statements and numerous slogans is much more colourful and emotion provoking than in informative parts of the text. Still even in them not so many superlatives are used. Language goes also more unofficial in slogans - longest format of written English is passed at some cases and substituted by quick short formats. Language stays readable all through the site and by wild guess (meaning not calculated) the words `youth`, `culture`, `chance`, `change`, `learn` and `experience` are most commonly used.

Application form:

Personal Information

Family Information: e.g. parents' occupations and siblings

Life Situation: e.g. studies and education, work experiences and occupation

Language Skills: time studied in each

Hobbies and Societal Participation: which organization, movements, municipalities, parish &c. and why participated

Volunteering Background: what type and how long

Personality: social/political/religious convictions, positive and negative personal characteristics

Wishes for placing: preferable order of destinations, anything goes vs specific interests, what prefers and why

Motivation: why do you apply, what are your expectations for, what type of volunteering you would like to do

Other Information: How did you find out about ICYE, Why do you want to do your exchange via ICYE

When reading the application form, one kind of guesses what type of answers they are expecting or which could be the right/best/most preferable answers. This type of questionnaire is not filled in a moment only, but asks quite a bit self-reflection and clarification of expectations and dreams. Like many times, volunteering and societal activity at least in some volume in past are highly appreciated. By asking about personality it comes clear, that some traits are more suitable for this type of activity than others.

Motivation part of the questionnaire was given a lot of space to write thoughts down – which seems to indicate the emphasis on this matter. Parents' occupations and a number of possible siblings seem somewhat irrelevant, but gives a feeling that they want to get to know you more personally. Last question about path to ICYE and final decision to apply to their programme (while there are numerous others) could be for data collecting purposes for them, just to get tips for better visibility arenas and main reasons to be picked among others.

Mission statements/key words/mottos/slogans/jargon:

- *built by youth*
- *a year in a foreign culture can be a life changing experience -> don't miss it!*
- *take your chance and change your daily life – once you are granny and gonna need something to remember*
- *simple and reliable*
- *you will experience everyday extreme sports and not just the highlights*
- *intercultural learning through real contacts*
- *plenty of time to learn the local language and the culture*
- *enough time to get to know your work mates, yourself and all kinds of folks around the world*
- *exchange year is your very survival course*
- *encounters and culture shocks*

- *NGO open for everyone*
- *want to explore the world? seize the opportunity – we support you!*
- *building bridges of peace, justice and understanding through personal encounters has been our goal ... past 50 years*
- *ICYE is one of the most experienced, personal and flexible programmes in the field of youth mobility and exchange*
- *our programmes have been constantly revised and modified to reflect changes in society at a local, national and global level*
- *Mission statement:*
 - o *to provide challenging intercultural learning experiences for young people*
 - o *to promote their social and personal development through international volunteer programmes*
 - o *to promote intercultural understanding, equality of opportunities, tolerance and peace among people in the world*

Aim

After getting to know the material about Maailmanvaihto ry in their website, it is obvious that the organization knows where it stands among others and what are its strengths and dimensions. Mission statement is openly written to be idealistic, but values do not need to be missing even from politically or religiously independent action. This type of NGO presents itself as a giver, provider and promoter, instead of being visibly in the role of receiver. Also the economical issues and money flows are presented in the webpage and for the equivalent of relevantly high amount of participation fee, they are of course forced to offer and promise many resources.

Reliability resulting from their solid experience in the field is underlined. To make the most out of the fact that Maailmanvaihto ry is a small actor, they promise that it is guaranteed to get personal and individually customized service. Possible applicant is also assured that the experience of past 50 years does not mean that their programmes are not modified and updated to better reflect the chances in local, national and global levels.

Realistic point of view

To take a part in a programme like this, they make it very clear that it is not only highlights and superb experiences to be expected, but learning, challenges, development and personal growth on the way too. Culture shock and feelings of attending to a survival game are presented as naturally belonging to the experience. This is most probably to give honest and reliable picture of what might

be ahead if taking the chance and grasping the opportunity to change every day life. Exploring the world sounds more exiting than get to know your self, but these two things are fitted to go hand in hand in words and easy to believe that in practise too.

Overall picture

For the basic information seeking purposes, this website manages to stay practical, simple and reliable. Identity along values and goals on the long run, are communicated self-possessively. It keeps up the image of professional and organized action. When needed, one can easily find the contact information for further questions and by leaving some specialized information outside from this site, they kind of a push for more personal forms of contact. It somehow seems to be designed for taking the first step, but initiative from possible volunteers' side has to be made before they really start to contribute and deepen their knowledge distribution.

This comes somewhat evident in the part introducing destination countries. There are not many pictures as one might assume; no fact sheets, no stories of former volunteers per country. On the site they only slightly describe current available projects per continent and as interest rises, further information has to be either asked via email, phone call or by visiting the office. One possible solution is to find information elsewhere as well.

There are no advertisements on the site and it tells about NGOs independency. Both financially and e.g. religiously and politically. As the overall image via delicate colour choices, also the content transmits neutrality. Interaction possibilities are not offered, but one can order a newsletter to a mailbox and fill & send the application form online.

By defining and positioning itself to the field of NGOs with same purposes, this particular one can base its uniqueness and reliability on many facts. As a part of wider organization, it has longer history to refer to and also more remarkable co-operation partners to mention. Website user comes easily convinced about its honest and good-will purposes.

b. www.volontariat.org

Visual semiotics:

Logos

The two logos of the association are:



This logo is the older one; we can find it on some chapters of the website coming without doubt from the previous website of the association. It is really a simple logo representing the name of the association as well as the earth surrounded by an arrow on a blue background.



Then, the actual report of activity contains this logo which is simpler and easier to read than the other. They just kept the name of the association and took off the small earth. One word "jeunesse" is written in a cursive way to show dynamism and movement. The other word "reconstruction" is written in bold standard, as a way to demonstrate the solidity, probably due to a long experience. Then we also have the small logo, which consist of one letter "r" for "reconstruction" containing the "j" of "jeunesse".

The motto "*L'interculturel en action*" ("the intercultural in action") is also important and is often quoted instead of this logo.

In this following description, I will just focus on the first page of the website. Even if it is maybe not the best one and the most interactive on the site, it is the first one that web users see. It gives them their first impression of the association. As a gate, it gives the opportunity to the association to present itself. So it is interesting to see the image it gives of itself.

First impression

My first impression at the view of this web page was an impression of confusion. I did not know where to look. I needed some seconds before I saw the title. The first thing that caught my attention was this second title with a sentence animated on a green table on the front on the page. It is a sentence to register. It was amazing because I discovered I could apply for something without really knowing what for the moment. Then, I looked the title of the page and the motto.

I experienced an important flow of data, coming in the same time. I was a little bit lost and I didn't know what were the major pieces of information. There are too many frames with very different pieces of information and links.

Amount of information

It is worth noticing the length of the sentences and the numerous frames surrounding them. There is a lot of information on this page. The letters are not so big and even if there are differentiated letters it is not easy at the beginning to make a selection between the more or less relevant information for the user. All these squared shaped symmetrical frames give an impression of strictness and somehow of an obsolete design.

Colours

The main colour is red. It is the color of the most important things on the page: title, chapters, legislation, partnership, statistics and registration. Then, the green has a particular importance. It is just located in the animated title informing you of an eventual reduction if you immediately register on line. This detail is important, as it shows the interest of the association for the on-line registrations. Finally, the grey color is used as a background for secondary information and the yellow color enlightens letters in the darkest frames. Blue is also present. The colors chosen are bright. There are no soft tones of graduated colors. They are a few and vivid, perhaps to make the reading easier and to hierarchy the information in a visual manner.

Movement

The movement is very restricted on this page. Only one of the subtitle is moving. It invites the Internet-user to apply. The animation is simple. The sentence scrolls from the left side to the right side. This animation gives a very little movement to the page, which could appear as really stared without it.

Pictures



Under the main title, some pictures show volunteers on the field. They are small so they just evoke different landscapes and types of work but we can't see them clearly. On the eight different pictures, we can see that volunteers are most of the time with partner of the country. These pictures give a concrete example of the possible activities and destinations the public of the web could reach thanks to the association. We cannot make them bigger by clicking with the mouse.

Professionalism

It appears clearly that the realisation of this website has not been done by a professional. The first page is not clearly readable at a glance. We got to know after this present analysis that it was the husband of the general delegate who made it.

The general design is simple. It is “functional” rather than aesthetic. But, truly it is not really attractive. The information seems to be more important than the communication.

All the accessible parts of the site are well ordered on the left part of the page. They follow a linear structure. The links towards partners’ websites are down on the center of the page.

It is amazing to notice that the center of the page is not interactive at all. It adds to this feeling of lack of interaction and oldness of the site.

Text semiotics:

Lexicon

The lexicon used is a young one, familiar but not too much. As for the formulation of the sentences, the choice of the words is to convey a realistic point of view. The superlatives are forbidden. The notion of culture, tolerance, insertion is preferred. To deepen the website analysis, it is very interesting to see that the user is asked to choose an area and then a country of destination. Once the choice is made, there are different pieces of advice. The future volunteer is made aware of the surprises he or she may encounter during his stay. Very realistic advices are given. The website pages try to avoid the most important part of the cultural shock by explaining before the departure the importance of discrepancy between the image we have of our destination and the people and the reality at the arrival.

Jeunesse et Reconstruction tells for example that for the African countries, the volunteer shall not expect to be welcomed as a savior. It explains that the people don’t necessarily ask any kind of help. The volunteer shall not think that his project is a humanitarian one. He is going to live a great experience but he will never rescue people in great distress, neither will he change the destiny of the development situation of the country. The cultural shock is evoked a few times. Most of these are testimonies recorded with previous volunteers who try to make the reader aware of the idealistic dreams of changing the world and prevent some problems on the field. Those can be very painful for the volunteers on the field. So, clearly the projects are more presented on a cultural or an intercultural point of view than on a solidarity point of view.

Application form:

Here are the questions rose on the application form of *Jeunesse et Reconstruction*. For some countries judged “without risk”, the application form is more a less implicating one. One is just asked formal data like, name address, sex, occupation, family members and motivation. But for the “sensible zone” as many African and Asian countries, a future trainee can say it in as many lines as he wants:

- if he has ever travelled out of France more than 3 weeks and if yes in with conditions;
- if he has ever experienced a cultural context different from his own;
- if he has ever worked in a team;
- if he has ever worked for free;
- why he wants to go to Africa or Asia;
- what are choice ideas about;
- why did he chose this frame to do his training;
- what does he knows about his physical resistance;
- what would be a successful experience for him;
- if he thinks it is normal that the organisation has the right to refuse his application.

All these questions are asking to the future volunteer to be honest with the organisation and with him/herself. He has to express his personal thoughts and experiences. Maybe, some help the internals to guess if he will be able or not to realise properly the tasks asked. Other questions aim at knowing if the volunteer is ready to leave and if he has wondered the good items. The choice of this precise organisation and the choice of the frame are important questions for *Jeunesse et Reconstruction* since it express the deep reason of the application.

The last question is interesting since it clearly ask his opinion to the applicant about the application process. It enhances the fact that the webmaster always put forward the role to play by the reader. He is always called to call and communicate his ideas and opinions to the organisation concerning the website. We can guess that it shows the strong willing of the organisation to show its open mind and to put itself into question.

Mission statements/key words/mottos/slogans/jargon:

Interculturality is maybe the most important notion. It is quoted many times. While it was not the case before, it even became the motto of the association as we saw before. The human dimension is emphasised. The motto echoes as a call to move and to go meeting the other cultures.

Among the words often repeated on the texts, we can read “intercultural”, “action”, “numerous options”, “and rich experience”, “ projects”. All these key words transmit the values of the association. The notion of project is in the core of its communication. It is as well a personal, a social project and an useful experience. It promises you learning of many new knowledges. Unforgettable experience is also often evoked. The website also insists on the existence of many options. The future volunteer can choose the destination, he can apply for a short or a long period, at every moment of the year. He can also directly book a ticket plane thanks to a link on the bottom of the page.

Aim

The aim is to show the way of acting and considering their own action by the insiders of the association and the previous volunteers. It shall be attractive enough to give the people the motivation to go for those projects. They shall be interested by their project but they also should be aware of the relive effect of such an engagement. On one hand, the website appears to “sell” a faraway destination, a social project and an incomparable experience, but on the other hand, it tries to be realistic about the range of the short term projects.

The aim of the communication of Jeunesse et Reconstruction is clearly described here, since the website has been realised by a non professional and there is no bias in the communicated message. The association is merely telling to the readers of these pages that it can offer him or her a great experience but that he or she also has to be aware that it also have its limits.

Realistic point of view

The way of dealing with the project, the encouragement for the future volunteers to meet the previous ones, the numerous testimonies imply that the tone is a realistic one. More than selling the dream of being an actor in the field of humanitarian or developmental help, it promotes an intercultural experience. The meeting of the cultures is the main point.

Overall picture

The web site of Jeunesse et Reconstruction reflects the image of the action of the association: it is simple but it tries to be efficient to a certain extend. It has a practical aim: to communicate its ideology and to recruit volunteers. For the first one, it explains its history, exhibits, its annual and moral report and it evokes its current actions. For the second, it aims at showing interest to the projects represent for them. The application on Internet is important: it is about one quarter of all

the applications. But, to be sure these applications are as reliable as the postal ones (and are not just the result of a sudden motivation of the viewer of the website), the discourse is a realistic one.

The testimony is interesting because the experience of the previous volunteers is used as a source of information. The meeting between “generations” is also an important point. The future volunteers have intermediaries to ask all the questions from and the links created consolidate the community of volunteers. The feeling of solidarity is noticeable. It is like receiving a relay stick from the previous volunteers. The identity of the individuals of this group is their common history and experience. They all have followed the same selection process, met the same people and had the same apprehensions before going.

The typical non-professionalism of the first page is a trait which certainly has to be linked with the constant lack of financial means of the NGO’s (in France at least). We can consider that as being a shame because they could have attracted more people with a better organized page but we can also guess that maybe, it does not discourage the really motivated readers and that those ones would keep on exploring the website without caring. In that way, it can be considered as a kind of selection process.

It gives the image of an efficient NGO. It gives a lot of information and aims at being informative before all. And it works. It gives the image of an humble association which is not spending much money in communication. The discourse concerning the conditions in the field is realistic. For once, it does not give the impression that the volunteers are going to change the world. It clearly explains the small scale ambition of such project. They are important at the individual level but can not in any case change the whole system.

The countries are presented mostly by their common characteristics. They are seen from a cultural point of view. The evocation of the cultural background, often a materialist one, is important. The less developed countries are not presented as help askers or needy but as a special field for a work. The association claims that the most important item in the project is the intercultural exchange rather than solidarity. It prevents the volunteers from any kind of pride given by such an action. An employee event told us that they try to see the potential “world rescuer” to discourage them to go with these ideas. In that way, the volunteers are called to be realistic as far as their action with Jeunesse et Reconstruction is concerned.

Personal considerations

What was the role taken by the website in my application (in taking the decision, on a practical point of view...)? Did it give me an image close to what I experienced on the field? How did the

communication of the association effects on me? What was my interest in choosing this merely organisation? What can I say about my experience abroad?

As I went abroad with this association a few years ago, it was interesting to analyse this web site. I think that there were many changes since the time of my departure with them (in 2000). To begin, I didn't have access to Internet at this period. It was not a great instrument as today. The information had to be asked by phone or by letters. The answer came by leaflet.

I think that all the advices concerning the realistic actions on the field were not mentioned or in a very short dimension. I can guess that all these advices are there to avoid the misunderstandings. Now, the volunteer is told before going what he could experience. I think this kind of practice was not so spread a few years ago. Those notions had not been explained to me beforehand. I think that I was motivated to go just for some exotic reasons, maybe like many other volunteers. I didn't really pay attention to the difference between social and environmental projects. For me, the association gave me the opportunity to be useful in a certain extent while spending my holidays in a nice country and meeting a culture different than mine.

Now, five years later, I think I enjoyed my stay and had no bad surprises as I did not expect anything. So, even in the worst situation, I kept on thinking that the things will pass. I did not think about the cultural shock and did not experience it as I had the chance to have a very nice animator who was really paternalistic and knew well the western culture. So he made all his everything he could to prevent us from any kind of bad situation and in my case it worked.

I think that the message changes as more and more people are motivated to live such an experience. The association is growing and can not take into account all the potential candidates, but it can prevent them from the risks of disillusion. Being pragmatic, they want to convey that value to their volunteers. Perhaps this issue happened many times and that is the reason why they have to be so direct on the website.

6. Comparisons/Conclusions

Chosen NGOs and their websites turned out to be interesting to see through semiotics. Though the field and their actions are already familiar to us, we feel now like having more complete picture of them as social actors. The websites are a privileged arena for these NGO to be visible and to speak about themselves. Thanks to that recruiting and application process are simply done. From every part of the world, public can access to these information. It is a full way of expressing NGO culture: Compared to printed paper, it is more interactive and more senses can be attracted (by the use of visual and audio elements).

After comparing both websites, we draw here the common picture of our social actor. To keep in mind, is that French website is constructed from another point of view than the Finnish one. By this we mean, that differences in a visual appearance are caused by another approach. It is also worth noticing that the French one is more unprofessional NGO compared to Finnish one. This is visible in their communication styles and choices made when constructing the websites. To a certain extent we can say that these websites also reflect somehow national cultures and that way different type of sign systems – both natural and other ones. To give an example, websites differ in how information is organized, how colours and pictures are used. How they approach and speak to the reader is a reflection of their conception and positioning of themselves.

Visual semiotics in these websites gave us an impression that the Finnish one appeared as more professional and gave priority to the core information and basic needs from the reader's point of view. The French one has included information of different importance and relevance to its site and carries not that organized or professional image. We could say that the Finnish one managed to concentrate more on quality than quantity. On both websites the use of similar kind of pictures was the most obvious common denominator. These pictures carried different feelings to motivate or touch the visitor of the website. In many of them former volunteers are shown in work among the locals, in an exotic surroundings. It calls the viewer to identify her/himself with this pleasant and active person.

In text semiotics we focused on messages that were performed in the form of "advertising". We would like to stress on the existence of numerous common jargon and lexicon. The language we found they share is put in the form of everyday life language in order to reach the largest public possible. Mottos are repeated most often all around the sites and are formulated in a way that one can easily remember and catch the main point.

In overall look these websites have common features: elements constructing the introduction of their projects, partners and targets; in description of recruiting process; on stressing their identity

as non-governmental organisations and as intermediates or as “helping hands” both for the direction of volunteers and target populations. They have chosen different approaches and sign systems in e.g. dealing with the positioning towards volunteers. We found comparisons made of their online application forms as an interesting example of the way they chose to deal with their needs and volunteers’ needs. They ask questions aiming at recruiting “suitable” volunteers for their purposes, which actually framed by the partners on the field and differing from one project to another. From the volunteers’ side, the application form gives them either certainty or uncertainty that they are the one needed and compatible the system. The websites differ when considering what they emphasize when picking out information from applicant.

Just to finish, we would like to draw attention to the growing role of the new medias and especially internet in the communication practiced by NGOs. With the limited economical resources NGOs can express themselves in this forum without big investments and directed to wider potential public. Especially important benefit for them is the fact that the group of people they want to reach is the most significant user of World Wide Web.

References

To collect printed data, we met many difficulties. We could not find any theoretical works about the subject in diverse library of the city. We came to the conclusion that external agents are not interested in writing on such subjects. Even if humanitarian help and international solidarity are largely studied in the last decades, it is not easy to get any research on the youth volunteer ships. Maybe, researches made are more for the internal use only. The NGOs have a great interest to know better their public so as to communicate in more effective way with them and to elaborate an efficient recruitment system. Often they internally realise studies concerning the profile of the volunteer. They have many statistics and figures about it. But sadly, these ones have not been published and are restricted to the use of NGOs employees. We can just bear on the information given by the website and the other communication means used. Thanks to our contact at Jeunesse et Reconstruction, we knew a little more than that.

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Interview:

As an informant via email interview, we would like to thank Mrs. Segolene DUHEM. As an employee at the Jeunesse et Reconstruction Headquarters, she helped us a lot by giving helpful and otherwise unreachable information.