# A Semiotic Analysis of the Gender Equality Paradigm.

# Case study: the Gender Pay Gap Campaign

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**Abstract.** Within the new European space of identity, attitude and action challenges, syntagms such as "unity in diversity" or "equal pay for work of equal value" have become identitarian brands for social groups with a high-level of self-awareness. Having the social semiotics (Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2006) as theoretical background, we focused our analysis on the gender equality paradigm.

The empirical data were provided by four visual texts of the Gender Pay Gap campaign, initiated by the European Commission in March 2009, in order to map the new European "puzzle-space"[5]. The analysis showed the importance of compositional, representational and interactive meanings within the European discourse on equality of chances and gender.

**Keywords:** sign, semiotic system, identity, European "puzzle-space", information campaign.

## 1. Beyond information campaigns – the "Gender Pay Gap" campaign

Defined as "the strategic design of a series of messages sent to one or more targeted populations for a discrete period of time in response to a positive or negative situation affecting the organization" (Moffitt 2005: 109), campaigns embed what Robert Kendall (1992: 3) identifies as an important characteristic of an organization, namely "to build trustworthy relationships with other citizens". Implicitly defined as citizens, organizations invest within these "coordinated efforts, oriented towards a particular objective or a set of correlated objectives" (Newsom, VanSlyke Turk, Kruckeberg ([2001] 2003: 571) in order to attain a certain aim which presupposes a

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[5] We used this post-modernist concept as it allows a circumscribing of curiosity-challenging attitudes, in order to re-encode *something* which has been intentionally deconstructed by maintaining the reencoder's mind/ the mind of the participant in the act of communication alert.

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cyclic process (Leinemann, Baikalţeva [2004] 2007: 22) where elements such as research, objectives, strategies, tactics, calendar, budget and evaluation play a significant role. This interdependence of elements beyond every campaign can also be graphically illustrated through the pyramid of strategic planning (Austin, Pinkleton in Watson, Noble 2007: 166): mission (the motivation beyond the organizational existence), aim (the direction towards which the organization should be heading), objectives (specificity), strategies (general approach), tactics (actions).

The implementation of a campaign could be analysed through the model of diffusion of innovations (Rogers [1962] 1983). According to Everett M. Rogers ([1962] 1983: 11), an innovation is "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption". Every diffusion of an innovation occurs through a five-step process of adoption: (1) *knowledge* (the exposure of the individual to an innovation about which he lacks information); (2) *persuasion* (the individual's interest in the innovation and his active involvement of finding more details about the respective innovation); (3) *decision* (the individual's judgment on the advantages/ disadvantages of using the respective innovation); (4) *implementation* (the testing of the innovation); (5) *confirmation* (the individual's decision on continuing to use the respective innovation).

Information campaigns bring into the individuals' cognitive maps new ideas about a product that should be bought or about a social action that should be implemented. We consider that this type of campaign encompasses the first two stages within the adoption process mentioned by E.M. Rogers, namely it is based on the one hand, on the awareness of a problem that might endanger the well-being of individuals and on the other hand, on the informing of the publics, the research having a rational and an emotional-laden impact as well.

The "Gender Pay Gap" Campaign launched by the European Commission (the portfolio of Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities) in March 2009 had as a starting point a common issue within European countries, namely a difference between men's and women's hourly earnings[2]. The research beyond this campaign showed that in 2008 across Europe, women earn on average 17.8% less than men (for example, in Romania, women earn 12.7% less than men). This issue has a twofold consequence: firstly, it breaches with the Article 141 of the EC Treaty which stipulates the application of the equal pay principle; secondly, the ongoing discrimination and inequalities in the labour market will affect women's pensions and will cause a higher risk of poverty for older women.

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[2] The information about this campaign was retrieved from the website of the European Commission: http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=681&langId=en, accessed May, 20, 2010.

The information campaign "Gender Pay Gap" mainly focused on conventional strategies and tactics: the dissemination of information was achieved through the website (http://ec.europe.eu/equalpay) and through four posters which embed four stages in an individual's development (childhood: "Boy or girl, equal opportunities?"; adulthood: "Is our work valued the same?"; family member: "Will having a child harm my career?"; retired person: "Same job, same pension?").

## 1.1. The "Gender Pay Gap" information campaign – a social practice

The "Gender Pay Gap" campaign could be interpreted as a discursive instance since it

*(…) contributes to the constitution of all those dimensions of social structure which directly or indirectly shape and constrain it: its own norms and conventions, as well as the relations, identities, and institutions which lie behind them. Discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning.* (Fairclough [1992] 2006: 64)

As we have mentioned above, this campaign raises a very sensitive issue, namely it brings to surface the downplaying of the Article 141 of the EC Treaty, and consequently of the European syntagm "unity in diversity". The European gender discourse is an allotopic construct which aims at *unifying* the different socio-economic gendered identities and the equality traits that the European ideology wants to rely on. The socio-economic nature of the European policies is essential for the regulation of gender relations within the member-states, even if the strategies are articulated in a "gender-free" language. The production of this differential discourse, articulated under a specific language, might reveal itself through information campaigns discursively constructed on visual and verbal elements that, in time, might be invested with a social value. Beyond the mere informative aspect of this campaign, there lies an implicit motive: to reestablish an equality principle between men and women. The expected behavior of the European member states coincides with what Norman Fairclough ([1992] 2006: 64) identifies as three effects of discourses: (1) construction of 'social identities' and 'subject positions'; (2) construction of social relationships between people; (3) construction of systems of knowledge and belief.

As a discursive practice, the "Gender Pay Gap" campaign involves three types of processes (Fairclough [1992] 2006: 73):

- *text production*: the campaign materials (leaflet, powerpoint presentation, posters, European map of average pay gaps);

- *text distribution*: the materials are available in 22 European languages;

- *text consumption*: a twofold interpretation at the micro-level (the semiotic analysis of the four posters) and at the macro-level (the ideology of the European Commission on gender differences).

The implicit social change beyond the "Gender Pay Gap" campaign could be encompassed within the framework of gender studies since there are mentioned five important interrelated factors[3] which this campaign was based upon:

- *direct discrimination* (less payment for women who do the same job as men);

- *undervaluing women's work* (downplaying women's competences, poor payment for jobs requiring similar skills, a bias of responsibility: more value attached to responsibility for capital than to responsibility for people);

- *segregation in the labour market* (predominance of women in lower valued and lower paid occupations, under-representation of women in managerial and senior positions);

- *tradition and stereotypes* (the influence upon the girls' and women's choice of educational paths and consequently of professional careers, fewer women working in scientific and technical jobs, women's reduction of working hours or their exit from the labour market in order to carry our child or elder care);

- *balancing work and private life* (women's family and care responsibilities, the parental leave, women's greater recourse to part-time work, the negative impact of women's interruptions on their career development and promotion prospects).


## 2. The micro-analysis of the "Gender Pay Gap" Campaign –

## a social semiotic perspective

### 2.1. The theoretical framework

In the article "Introduction: What is sociosemiotics?", Paul Cobley and Anti Randviir (2009: 23) mention that sociosemiotics/ social semiotics[4] focuses on "the

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[3] http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=682&langId=en, accessed May, 20, 2010.
[4] The distinction between sociosemiotics and social semiotics is rather a matter of geographical origin. Whereas the former term belongs to the European tradition, the latter is related to the Anglo-Australian
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self's relation to/ constitution by social reality", having, as key entities, words such as organization, intentionality, exchange, communication, interaction-communication, process-structure, praxis, agency, socialization, culture (and multiculturalism), ideology, institution, modernity, globalization.

Having as starting point M.A.K. Halliday's functional grammar, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen have provided a grammar of visual design which operates through semiotic systems taking into account the patterns of experience, social interaction and ideological positions. The metafunctions of this grammar of visual design have been adapted to Halliday's functional terminology: ideational → representational, interpersonal → interactive, textual → compositional.

Kress and van Leeuwen ([1996] 2006) replace the sign, the elementary unit in classic semiotics, with four semiotic systems:

- *represented participants*. The advantage of this term lies in "the relational characteristic" of "participant in something" (Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2006: 47). The two representational meanings are: on the one hand, *narrative* (transactional actions, circumstances of setting, means and accompaniment) and on the other hand, *conceptual* (classificational, analytical, symbolic structures). According to the type of structure to be analysed, participants will be provided different roles: *actor* and *goal*, *carrier* and *attribute*. One should be aware that beyond every represented participant there lies a flow through three categories that Charles Sanders Peirce labels as firstness[5], secondness and thirdness (CP 8.238): the manifestation of material quality or feeling (firstness) will take the form of action, reaction, reality, factuality or demonstrative application (secondness) and finally will be embodied into an appeal to a mind, representation, order or unity (thirdness).

- *interactive participants*. Every semiotic act presupposes the existence of a receiver, hence interactive participants are those who speak and listen to or write and read, make images or view them. Elements such as *gaze* (or *contact*), *distance* (or *size of frame*), *perspective* (or *point of view*) and *modality* (or *reality*

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tradition. In the book *Introduction to Social Semiotics,* Theo van Leeuwen (2005: 3) identifies a threefold purpose of social semiotics: (a) collect, document, and systemically catalogue semiotic resources (including their history); (b) investigate how these resources are used in specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts, and how people talk about them in these contexts – plan them, teach them, justify them, critique them, etc.; (c) contribute to the discovery and development of new semiotic resources and new ways of using existing semiotic resources.

[5] "Firstness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else. Secondness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third. Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other." (CP 8.238)

*value*) are invested with interactive meanings because they create a particular relation between viewers and the image within the pictorial frame.

- *composition*. A "meaningful whole" (Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2006: 181) is achieved through three main resources of compositional structures: (1) information value (various 'zones' of the image*:* left and right, top and bottom, centre and margin); (2) framing (framing devices through dividing lines, or by actual frame lines in order to create meanings of disconnection – individuality/ differentiation and of connection – sense of group identity); (3) salience (as placement in the foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in tonal value/ colour, differences in sharpness etc.).

- *modality*. In what visual design is concerned, there are several embodiments of modality: (1) naturalistic (high degree of realism); (2) sensory (low degree of realism, fantastic); (3) scientific (technological, low degree of realism, abstracts from detail); (4) abstract (low degree of realism, indication of 'high art').

Following Thomas Sebeok's ([1981] 2002: 25) twofold objective of semiotics (semiosis and representation) or Umberto Eco's ([1976] 1979) twofold theory (the theory of codes – the semiotics of signification and the theory of sign production – the semiotics of communication), Kress and van Leeuwen ([1996] 2006: 13) consider that a social semiotic approach should include:

- *the line of communication* since discursive participants take into account forms of expression that should be maximally transparent to other participants and since the social structures where communication takes place are marked by power differences. Thus the notion of 'maximal understanding' is relative to the type of participant (producer or interpreter).

- *the line of representation*. The sign-makers will choose "the most plausible, the most apt form" for the representation of the respective participant. Social institutions also produce messages which take "the form of the (histories of) conventions and constraints" (*Ibid.*). We consider that Kress and van Leeuwen's concept of plausibility could be associated to Charles Sanders Peirce's typology of signs (CP 2.247-2.249), thus showing the flow from simple to complex representations: iconic signs (analogical relations), indexical signs (contiguity relations), symbolical signs (conventional relations).

**2.2. Visual representations of the "Gender Pay Gap" campaign**

The gender equality paradigm that this EC information campaign is built on could be interpreted in compositional terms. The choice of a dual horizontal and vertical visual structure could be graphically represented through an implicit mathematical sign "=" which serves as an indexical sign of a twofold embodiment of equality:

- at the nonverbal level (the vertical display – Fig. 1, Fig. 2): equal visual fields (boy + girl; young woman + young man; young woman + young man + a girl – at the bottom of the image; old woman + old man). The two parallel lines embody the Peircean category of secondness since anyone who sees this mathematical sign relates it to the concept of association (x=2, meaning x is associated to 2). But within a social structure, it should be linked to thirdness since it embodies the representation of equality between two elements belonging to different social fields.



Fig.1                                                           Fig.2

- at the verbal level (the horizontal display – Fig. 3, Fig. 4): four sequences of different questions – one answer (*questions* – "Boy or girl, equal opportunities?"; "Is our work valued the same?"; "Will having a child harm my career?"; "Same job, same pension?" ↔ *answer* – "Close the gender pay gap").



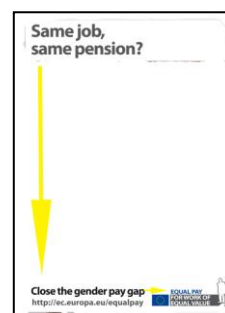Fig.3                                                           Fig.4

In what the representational meaning is concerned, the four posters (Fig.6, 7, 10, 12) portray the eight represented participants in a conceptual manner without any explicit transactional actions taking place. All the participants are grouped in two classificational categories, visually belonging to two distinct classes: women versus men. The diachronic aspect plays a twofold role within the pay gap: at the remuneration aspect and at the level of social evolution.

The European Commission, as a producer of semiotic resources, uses certain symbol-signs as its visual identity marker, namely the flag as a symbol of the European Union and certain indexical signs of a masculine and a feminine silhouette as the logo of this campaign (Fig. 5) in order to highlight the existence and the persistence of the gender pay gap in all member-states of the EU.



Fig.5

The slogan of this campaign, "Equal pay for work of equal value", raises the problem of the ideological European discourse on gendered citizenship. The "Gender Pay Gap" campaign uses a specific terminology that can be mapped within the EC position documents[6]. Starting with reference terms such as *applying, frame, equality, treatment, life, social life*[7] the terminology has evolved towards *flexicurity*, *participative*, *gender pay gap*, *equality of chances*, *integrated approach*[8].

The four posters (Fig.6, 7, 10, 12) do not represent participants who do something to other participants, but rather they represent the way in which binary participants fit

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[6] The Reports of the European Commission on the Gender Pay Gap, for 2007, 2008 and 2009, available online at: http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?pager.offset=30&catId=738&langId=en&furtherPubs=no. Accessed 10.11.2010.

[7] Terminology outlined within the Gender Pay Gap Report issued by the European Commission in 2007, available online at:
http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?pager.offset=110&catId=738&langId=en&furtherPubs=no,
Accessed 09.11.2010.

[8] Terminology outlined within the Gender Pay Gap Report issued by the European Commission in 2009, available online at:
http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?pager.offset=70&catId=738&langId=en&furtherPubs=no, accessed 09.11.2010.

together to make up a larger conceptual whole of equality. Thus the roles assigned to the represented participants are not those of "actors" and "goals", but rather the roles of "carriers" and "attributes". Each poster is shaped on male and female participants who function as "gender carriers" and who might be distinguished by "bodily possessive attributes", such as short versus long hair, make-up, or articles of clothing.

One interesting aspect could be noticed at the compositional level, namely the way in which the information value on equality is rendered in the two equal visual fields. Whereas the first poster presents a dual structure ordered from left to right on the "carrier" of a boy and then of a girl (Fig. 6), the other three posters change the distribution order (Fig.7) and the interactive meaning is rendered on the same horizontal axis but this time, from a woman (left) towards a man (right).



Fig.6                                                  Fig.7

The positioning is especially chosen in order to visually highlight the messages designed under the form of questions at the top level of the posters, questions with only two possible choices (negative or positive). The story of each poster is a diachronic layout, within which specific stages are pointed out: the childhood – "Boy or girl, equal opportunities?"; the first workplace – "Is our work valued the same?"; the starting moment of a family – "Will having a child harm my career?"; the retirement stage: "Same job, same pension?". It is these stages that define a woman's evolution in society, according to the economic and social policies of the EU, starting with the Maastricht Treaty – The Social Chapter[9] and the Treaty of Rome – art.119. Sylvia Walby (1997: 200) considers that

(…) *the economic strategies are highly gendered, even though they are usually articulated in gender-free language. There are several ways in which these policies and*

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[9] The Maastricht Treaty (1992) *The Social Chapter*, pp.319-330. Online version available at: *http*://eur-lex.europa.eu/ro/treaties/index.htm#founding. Accessed July, 20, 2010.

*their implications are gendered, including: the differential impact on sex-segregated industries; the differential impact on highly qualified as compared with vulnerable workers (in practice a gendered divide); and their impact on welfare regimes which typically disproportionately support women.*

It is especially this impact of the social policies which, from the very beginning, presents a binary potential represented through the paradigm of equality of chances. In all the four posters, the difference of chances is questioned, the remuneration aspect being introduced through the bottom-level message, the slogan and the symbol-signs. The identitarian positioning is clearly marked by the gendered approach, thus the potential of chances within the relevant evolutionary domains of the two discursive carriers emerges.

In what the interactive meaning is concerned, there is a twofold interactive participant: on the one hand, the ones who have initiated the campaign, namely the European institutions, and on the other hand, the projected receivers of the message, the EU citizens who are integrated within the visual frame through close-up shots of the represented participants.

From the point of view of "the image act and the gaze" (Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2006: 116), a direct visual contact is created with the interactive participants. As such, the vectors which emerge from *the gaze* of the participants create the fundamentals of a connection between the participants (interactive and represented), a connection which takes a visual form, projecting itself in the identitarian level of belonging to the same social groups. It is what Kress and van Leeuwen ([1996] 2006: 117) refer to as: "(...) acknowledging the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual 'you'".

The salience element within the compositional meaning is activated through the size of the represented participants, all of them being positioned in the foreground, without any significant difference in the precision of the outline, except for the third poster (see Fig.10). It is this aspect which denotes that this campaign is dedicated to promoting the equality of chances and of gender equality as well.

Within the four posters, it is the question that targets the social chances of the two carriers which constitutes the signifying pivot of the structure. For example, the syntagm "Boy or girl, equal opportunities?" points to stereotypes and prejudices in standardising a person. Figure 8 represents the signification process beyond the dichotomy "boy or girl".
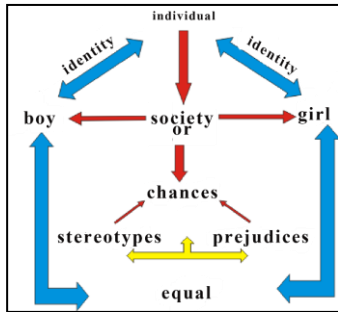
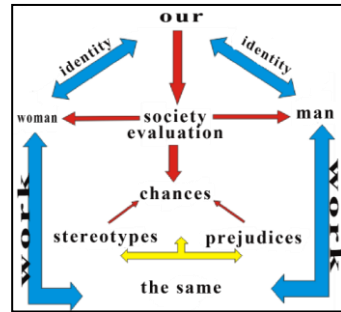Fig.8                                                          Fig.9

The binary potential of the *carrier* increases in complexity in the second poster (Fig.7). The represented participants are adults, thus the subjects of the communication act already have gone through a social binary labeling (boy versus girl). The distinction between the female and the male carrier is better rendered through attributes shaped on the colour and clothing codes (black and office clothes). The signification process (Fig.9) is built on the evaluation of two employees of different gender. It is interesting to observe the change in the verbal text. Whereas the first poster is based on disjunction (boy or girl), the second poster reveals, through the first-person plural pronoun "our work", a social unity under the umbrella-platform of employment.

Within the third poster of the campaign (Fig.10) there is a shift in the binary structure of the participants. The message conveyed becomes unilateral, clearly revealing the fundamentals of the European discourse – balancing work and private life.




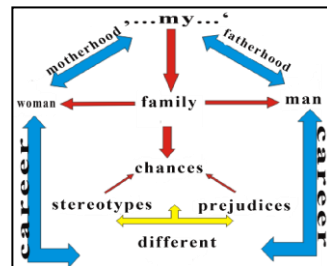Fig.10                                                        Fig.11

Within the fourth poster (Fig.12) of the campaign, the pension stage is approached. There is a shift of the conceptual structure towards the social security system in the

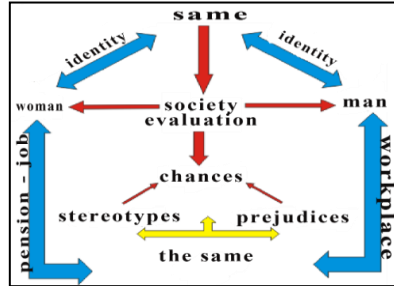EU and towards the life-long-learning concept.


Fig.12


Fig.13

The axis analysis (Fig.14, 15, 16, 17) within the information value beyond the compositional meaning might provide challenging interpretation of the equality paradigm.
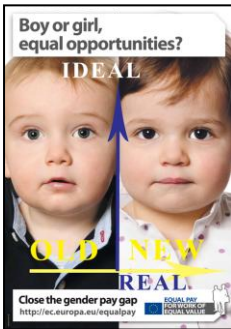

Fig.14


Fig.15


Fig.16


Fig.17

If we take into account the horizontal axis (old versus new) and the vertical axis (real versus ideal), there could be observed a discrepancy between the first poster and the other three posters. Whereas in the first poster (Fig.14), there is the male carrier in the left visual field, and the female carrier in the right visual field, in the other three posters (Fig. 15, 16, 17), there is a change of position on the time axis, the male carrier dominating the right visual field whose compositional meaning focuses on novelty and future, thus implicitly assigning a superiority role to the adult male carriers on the European labour market. This superiority could be linked either to social evolution or to remuneration. The vertical axis encompasses the bottom message ("Close the gender pay gap") which signifies a social practice that should turn into reality and the top messages linguistically rendered through four questions pinpoint some ideal situations implicitly rendered either through positive or negative answers.

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Fig. 16 shows that the structure of the composition undergoes an alteration through the insertion of a triangle which conveys directionality, attracting processes than "qualities of being" (Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2006: 55). What is interesting to notice is the reversed positioning of the tilted triangle, from the ideal level towards the real level, a choice which unifies two rectangles – the woman and the man, the potential parents of the child.

In conclusion, it is due to the twofold signification (equality of chances and of gender) that the socially creative interactions unfold:

- the nonverbal representation of the gender paradigm supports the societal levels of the non-gendered citizen, namely the dual visual elements of the female and male participants, equally objectified during specific levels of social transformations;

- the verbal representation brings forth the ideological regulation intended by the European institutions, equally repetitive and mapped within the composition of the posters.

The European "puzzle-space" based on an equality paradigm mainly focuses on a resignification act assigned to the well-known dichotomy "male versus female" in terms of an ideological discourse discursively represented through a binary process of choice and attitude.

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