THE WORDS OF COVID-19: Greece

(new) heroes
(Neoi Iroes - (Νέοι) Ήρωες)

by Ioanna Vovou

Abstract:

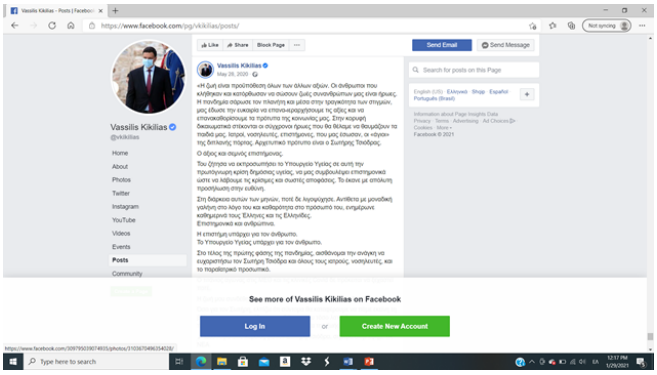
The use of the expression *"new heroes"* is discussed here as an entry point, as a conceptual tool for understanding how mediated discourse is producing meaning, every time it appears 'narrating the facts' or 'telling reality', in this particular context, that of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding some of the media narrative structures and the social repercussions accompanying the concept of "new heroes" during the pandemic, is the aim of this analysis.

Η έκφραση *Νέοι Ήρωες* συζητείται εδώ ως ένα σημείο εισόδου, ως εννοιολογικό εργαλείο για την κατανόηση του τρόπου με τον οποίο ο διαμεσολαβημένος λόγος παράγει νόημα κάθε φορά που εμφανίζεται να 'εξιστορεί τα γεγονότα' ή να 'περιγράφει την πραγματικότητα', εδώ, αυτή της πανδημίας του νέου κορωναϊού COVID 19. Στόχος της παρούσας ανάλυσης είναι η κατανόηση ορισμένων αφηγηματικών δομών και των κοινωνικών απολήξεων που συνοδεύουν την ιδέα των «νέων ηρώων» κατά τη διάρκεια της πανδημίας.

Etymology:

Hero, from the Greek *Ήρως [Iros]* which means "protector".

Problematization:





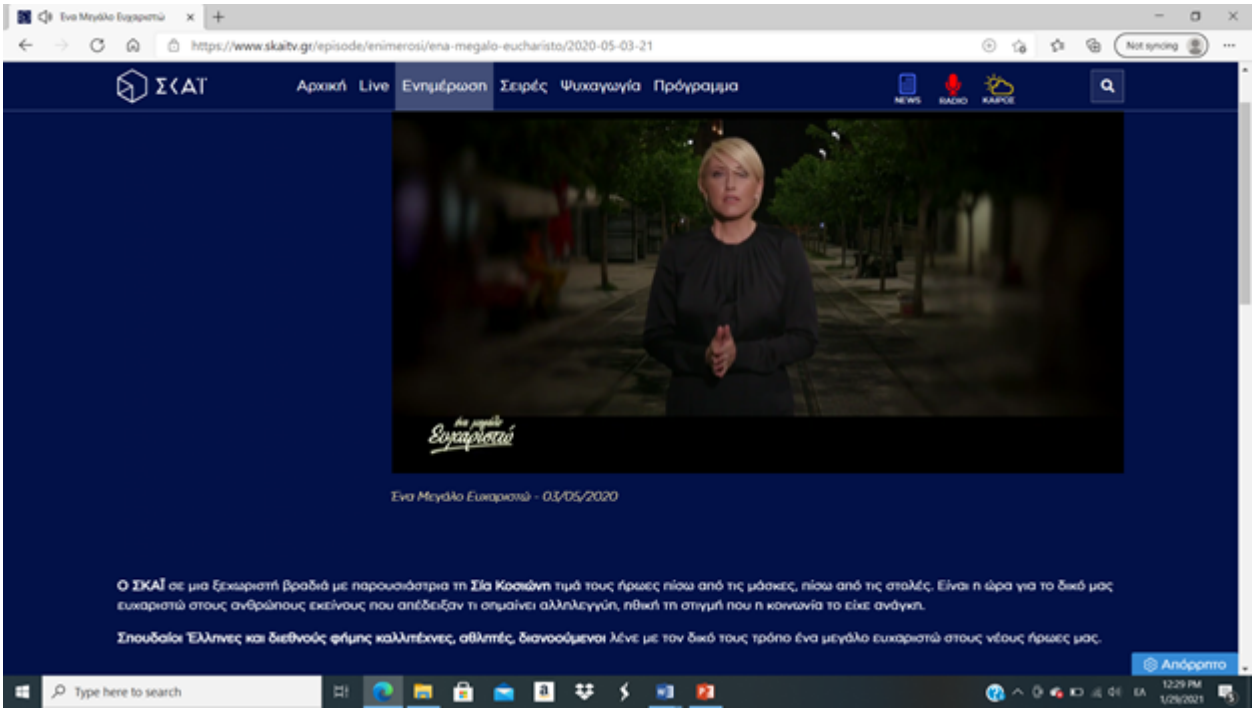
"[…] At the top stand, by right, the contemporary heroes that we would like our children to admire. Doctors, nurses, scientists, who saved us, the 'saints' next door. An archetypical model is Sotiris Tsiordas […]"*
Greek Minister of Health Vassilis Kikilias, post on Facebook on 28/5/2020 (from the Minister's article in the newspaper *Ta Nea* on 28/5/2020*)*
**Sotiris Tsiordas, head of the Greek scientific committee for combating the SARS Covid-19.*



«... The great successes are due to the many little heroes, who respond to the call of responsibility. And these heroes are each and every one of you. Thank you for making our country an example for the whole world.…"
"… and the protagonists became the silent people…"

Greek Prime Minister's televised address at the beginning of the gradual lifting of the first quarantine measures in Greece, on April 28, 2020
Διάγγελμα Κυριάκου Μητσοτάκη - YouTube
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU9bNPzIIio
(Quote at: 1'13-1'27'' and at 11'42")

«A big thank you»
ΣΚΑΙ, originally broadcasted on 03/05/2020
«SKAI in a special evening with Sia Kosioni as a presenter honors the heroes behind the masks, behind the costumes. It is time for our thanks to those people who proved what solidarity means, morality, at a time when society needed it.
Great Greek and internationally renowned artists, athletes, intellectuals say in their own way a big thank you to our new heroes».
Presentation of the program on the TV channel's website
https://www.skaitv.gr/episode/enimerosi/ena-megalo-eucharisto/2020-05-03-21



«Tonight we will honor our New Heroes», Sia Kosioni, journalist, presenter of the main news bulletin on the Greek private TV channel SKAI
«A big thank you», Special TV show, 03/05/2020,
Quote at 2'37''
https://www.skaitv.gr/episode/enimerosi/ena-megalo-eucharisto/2020-05-03-21



"The Heroes behind the mask"

The terms *Heroes* and *New Heroes* are among those widely used during the pandemic and from the beginning of it, worldwide. The examples aforementioned are indicative of the prevalent media and political discourse during the pandemic and of the contextual use of the notion of *heroism,* which functions as an ideological marker of a certain shift of values, due, precisely to the exceptional situation, the world is coping with.

The concept of *heroism*, strongly present in public discourse (e.g., political, media, medical), as well as the highly

repetitive occurrence of the term, in relation with a situation characterized as a 'war' against an 'invisible' and 'insidious' 'enemy', mobilizes a nexus of social representations of the pandemic and of the 'legitimate' social attitudes that evolve around it. In fact, these 'new heroes' find their meaning in a context qualified as a war (against the virus).

In a parallel layer of perception, under the discursive proposition *hero operating in a context of the war against the virus,* we can also glimpse the following fundamental cultural dichotomy which is veiled: *good* versus *evil.*

[Referring to his work on the psychology of evil and the psychology of heroism, Franco Zimbardo (2011) claims that the two lines of research represent "two sides of the same coin"].

Communication strategies:

Referring to doctors, health care personnel, food chain and cleaning workers, etc., that are in the 'front line' of combatting the virus in terms of the 'new heroes', the 'heroes next door', the 'little heroes' or the 'silent people' contributes to the understanding of the pandemic as a crisis situation that calls for a superior ethical attitude from each and every one of us. These 'new heroes' of the pandemic (scientists, doctors, health and medical workers, etc.) live between us, perform their duty, their heroic actions, every single day. The mediation of these archetypical hero constructions includes personal qualities and social behaviors such as 'personal responsibility', empathy, self-denial and sacrifice of their own comfort and well-being, jeopardy of their own health and life, elements which could be found in a more 'improved version of ourselves'.

Our attention goes also to the adjective 'new'. The 'newness' of a situation is to be perceived in relation, *in comparison* with another state of things. For if no comparison is possible then there is no perception of the 'novelty', the difference, the shift, the passage in a different state of values.

Here the adjective 'new' introduces a rupture, a break, in, at least, two levels:

- Firstly, regarding a time scale: 'new' compared to 'old' heroes. Whenever the 'new heroes' of the pandemic are repeatedly present in mediated discourses a whole literary and fictive tradition of 'old' heroes is recalled *in absentia* in our collective imaginary. These 'old' heroes are traditionally qualified by outstanding, exceptional, far above average or even supernatural powers and attributes. To put it *in other words:* in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the comparison between 'old heroes'/ 'new heroes' is veiling another dichotomy: "Super heroes" / "ordinary people" (aspiring to a mimetic attitude towards the 'heroes').
- This leads us to the second level of understanding of the 'newness' in the use of the concept of heroism during the pandemic, that is to consider the 'new' as *different*. Different from what is usually expected when we evoke the concept of heroism. If we follow the thought of Boris Groys regarding art and noting that "to ask about the new is tantamount to asking about value" (Groys, 2014: 8), we observe a certain shift of values that are occurring during the pandemic.

The re-evaluation of the idea of the "heroic elects" (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006), and, in a parallel layer of perception related to the contemporary popular culture, that of the standard media celebrities' figures, underpin the new heroes' narrative, developed during the pandemic.

Therefore, how are these archetypical new hero constructions mediated in order to inspire and call for a mimetic moral and emotional attachment (see also Frye, 1957) by the rest of the society? To put it otherwise, how the reference to the 'new heroes' of the pandemic is expected to create a social and sentimental engagement towards the citizens? In what way, we – ordinary people - can relate to these 'new heroes'? Why and how do they *matter to us*?

In fact, the accessibility of these characteristics defining the heroic attitude during the COVID-19 pandemic, combining both achievement and morality (Goethals & Allison, 2012), leading to a highly ethical social behaviour and, respectively, their discursive iteration invest on the idea of "the banality of heroism", a concept suggesting "that we are *all* potential heroes waiting for a moment in life to perform a heroic deed" (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006). Thus, by mobilizing the rhetorical arsenal of 'heroism', and, consequently, that of 'war', a call for solidarity is addressed, followed by the proposal of a possible and desirable world and *modus vivendi* inside of it. Here, we can find a prescriptive attitude of the mediated discourse circulating during the pandemic. Prescriptive of the 'right', the 'correct',

the advisable and acceptable behaviour to adopt and follow.

What one might notice, nevertheless, is that the repetitive recourse to the heroic acts and subjects -in particular during the first months of the pandemic- seems to leave little - discursive - space in order to focus on the institutional and state obligations towards the medical personnel and health system.

Additionally, a heroic attitude usually refers to an act performed by an individual. The paradox, in this case, is that by using the metaphor of “heroes”, one can think that a threat that is considered to be a collective one worldwide, is supposed to be combatted by solitary, brave individuals. The potential slip from a solitary consideration of the ‘personal responsibility’ one must demonstrate in order to protect the collectivity to the exemption of the collective/communitarian and institutional/state responsibilities the pandemic is calling for, is indicative of the ambiguity of the term. After all, in a situation in which even ‘heroes’ fail, who would think to look for collective responsibility in ‘ordinary’ citizens, institutions and states?

Subversion:

This latent yet persistent call for a ‘superior selfhood’ as a new state of truthfulness that needs to impregnate social interactions in the era of the 'new normal' becomes the answer to the state of peril the world is facing due to the pandemic. After all, one fundamental function of heroes (whether they are old, new, super, little…), is to protect, to offer the sentiment of a certain security in a highly uncertain situation involving the elements of a crisis. And as Boris Cyrulink (2016) would put it, the heroic figure, is, even before it becomes personified, an answer to a need.

In that way, *ordinary* and *everyday* heroes, defying our mediocrity or taking vengeance for our vulnerability in front of the disease suggest an emotionally lifting public and highly mediatized discourse, repairing, counterbalancing in a certain way *“[…] the fear of a breakdown that has already been experienced”* (Winnicott, 1974).

For the call for ‘heroism’ through the glorification of these new heroes can be apprehended as a - rhetorical - attempt to regain and redefine a mediated trust in contemporary societies in which trust seems to have been wounded. After all, quoting the Greek journalist Sia Kosioni: “*It is time for our thanks to those people who proved what solidarity means, morality, at a time when society needed it”* (*«A big thank you»,* TV Channel SKAI, 3/5/2020, quote: 5’48-5’57’’)

Discussion:

Understanding the narrative structure and the social repercussions accompanying the concept of “new heroes” during the pandemic, as a major component of the era of the ‘new normality’ which calls for the admittance of heroism as the ‘norm’ (Singer et al.: 2003), is the aim of this particular study of the latter expression.

As we have tried to point out by this analysis of the term ‘new heroes’, the choice of words is not neutral.

Could you think of other qualifications or expressions that could be used in order to describe the role played by doctors, health care personnel and other categories of actors that have been the most solicited during the pandemic of Covid-19, without recurring exclusively to the words “heroes”/ “new heroes”?

Sources/Examples of media and political discourse:

“Two words for Sotiris Tsiordas”, post on Facebook of the Greek Minister of Health Vassilis Kikilias on 28/5/2020 (from the Minister’s article in the newspaper *Ta Nea* on 28/5/2020*).*

Greek Prime Minister’s Televised Address on April 28, 2020

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