

## *Foreign Language Homepages: Representations of Internationalization*

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### **Abstract**

The marketing techniques of higher education institutions (HEI) are evolving due to pressures from an administrative system that closely responds to the business ethos of competition. Currently many HEIs are in the process of internationalizing their programs, due to pressures from the economic sectors and educational policies administered from the government. However, just how a HEI is able to internationalize is dependent upon the structure that is already in place. If how a HEI incorporates the ideals of internationalization is based upon its ability to do so, it follows that how a HEI displays its incorporation of the ideals of internationalization is based on what the institution is capable of offering. This presentation is based on a semiotic analysis of the foreign language homepages of three Japanese HEIs. This analysis discusses how the ideals of internationalization are being captured on these webpages utilizing Barthes' theories of cultural semiotics. First a discussion of the Barthesian approach to semiotics will demonstrate how this approach is applicable to knowledge management. This will expand to how the semiotic theoretical framework can be applied within the structure of foreign language homepage analysis. This will include a brief explanation of what we would expect to see on a foreign language homepage, and sampling methods for this analysis. This paper will conclude with a short discussion of one part of a semiotic analysis will to demonstrate how the foreign language homepage is a representation of how HEI are incorporating the ideals of internationalization within their institutional structures.

Keywords: Internationalization, university homepages, information needs, international students

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## **1. The Introduction**

Changes to educational policies are influenced by social structures. These social structures are in turn influenced by the economic market and the construction of the shared cultural identity of a nation (Hall, 1997) in relation to other nations. Accordingly, when researching how higher education institutions (HEI) are incorporating what it means to be international within the global higher education scene it necessitates understanding not only what the processes of internationalization and globalization are, but what this means in relation to the cultural identity of a specific nation. This would then enable an understanding of how a specific nation's HEIs are incorporating values of internationalization within their structures, as well as facilitate an analysis of the success of this incorporation. This paper will first briefly discuss the role of English through the internationalization of Japanese educational policies. This background will provide the basis of understanding how the foreign language homepages of Japanese HEIs can be analyzed as signs, under Barthes theories of cultural semiotics, as to the degree to which they are incorporating the ethos of internationalization of HEI. Within this, a semiotic analysis of the FLHs at will provide explicit examples of the degree to which Japanese HEIs have incorporated these values under the binary of internationalized or not.

## **2. The incorporation of internationalization within educational policies**

The internationalization of education is often cited as the impetus behind curricula reform. Accordingly, the internationalization of a nation's curricula has subsequently become an indicator of a nation's educational system as being international (Huang, 2006). In Japan, the notion of internationalization is often equated with globalization and the need to benefit from this potential power, while also safe guarding Japan's own cultural identity and power (Hashimoto, 2000; Phan, 2013). Thus, there has been much criticism that the way in which Japan is incorporating the value of internationalization into its educational policies is to both protect Japan's national identity as well as to promote Japan's uniqueness to others (Hashimoto, 2013; Kawai, 2009; Seargeant, 2008). This equates in the development of national educational policies regarding foreign language learning and usage, that these policies have been strongly attached to what it means to be Japanese. English has long been the preferred foreign language taught in Japanese schools, yet it was not until 1989 that the purpose of teaching communicative English as officially declared by the Ministry of Sports, Science, Culture and Education (MEXT) (Tahira, 2012). Furthermore in 2000 the Prime Minister's commission decided to adopt English as an official language to represent Japan in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Hashimoto, 2009). Yet, despite this adoption, it is not until 2009 that educational policies began to focus on the development individuals with a global outlook (Yonezawa, 2014). The implications of this are that instead of solely focusing on the development of language skills amongst students, language learning was developing in tandem with the development of expression through creativity and critical thinking skills. However, it was not until 2013 that MEXT (2013) officially outlined specific targets for communicative language learning by Japanese students. The reasons behind the change in focus is linked to students' prospective "career choices" (MEXT, 2014) – an economic reason, which policies on English language teaching and learning have consistently been criticized for (Hashimoto, 2013, Yonezawa, 2014). These criticisms stem from the notion that English in Japan has been adopted solely because it is the lingua franca of interaction

in the global marketplace (Phan, 2013; Yonezawa, 2014). However within this, these policies are also criticized in terms of national identity formation. The focus on developing English abilities amongst Japanese speakers is to protect what it means to be Japanese – through whom uses Japanese, and to be able to use English as tool in which Japanese can share their ideas with others (Hashimoto, 2009; Phan, 2013). In this light, it can be seen that the incorporation of English within the Japanese education system has become symbolic of internationalizing and being a contributing member of the global marketplace. Accordingly, if the use of English is a representation of the incorporation of the value of internationalization within education, how is this value visualized within HE? One way to analyze the value of international within HE is through an analysis of a HEI's foreign language homepages (FLH). The information inputted on the FLH along with the degree to which conventions to webpage structure and design have been followed are a visual display, a sign of the degree to which a HEI has incorporated the ethos of internationalization into its infrastructure. Accordingly, a semiotic analysis will be employed in the ensuing discussion to assess the degree to which Japanese HEIs are internalizing the ethos of internationalization.

### **3. Barthes theories of cultural semiotics**

Barthes theories on cultural semiotics can be used to understand the meaning of FLHs as a sign of the extent to which HEIs have incorporated the value of internationalization within their structures. In a semiotics a sign is an image, text, or sounds. In a semiotic analysis the elements of a sign are more than a means to illustrate. Signs are images and they are discursive constructs which carry analyzable meaning (Lynn & Lea, 2005). Barthes (1957/1984) focuses on the relationships between the denotation of a sign, its labeling functions or literal meanings, and the connotation of a sign, the additional associations added to it (Barthes, 1957/1984; Bignell, 2002). Meaning within a sign thus becomes representative of concepts and ideas, such as the focus here, the incorporation of internationalization ideals within a HEI's structure. To enable this to happen, meaning is bounded through the cultural context of the sign's production and to whom it is received by. Accordingly, meaning is polysemous, as the representations of concepts and ideas are bound by not only cultural contexts, but also by how they are interpreted in their reception (Barthes, 1957/1984). While the meaning of a sign must be found within the sign (Rose, 2012), it must be understood that through the sign's construction and interpretation additional cultural meanings are added to the original sign. The meaning of the sign is therefore relational as what is considered as normal or not is based upon the common attributes within a specific boundary, which have been socially accepted.

#### **3.1 What we expect to see on a FLH**

In order to perform a semiotic analysis of the FLHs of Japanese HEIs it is first important to establish what are considered as universal principles in basic structure in webpage design. The basic design and information conventions, such as the placement of language options, the institution's name and logo, and key navigation tabs all combine to promote user-friendliness. Figure 1 depicts the standardized basic webpage structure, which according to Lynch and Horton (2008), most webpages conform to. Murthy et al. (2011) state that the navigation links available on a HEI's

websites are based on what the institution chooses to offer perspective users of the site. This is of importance because it is the institution that is choosing what it puts on

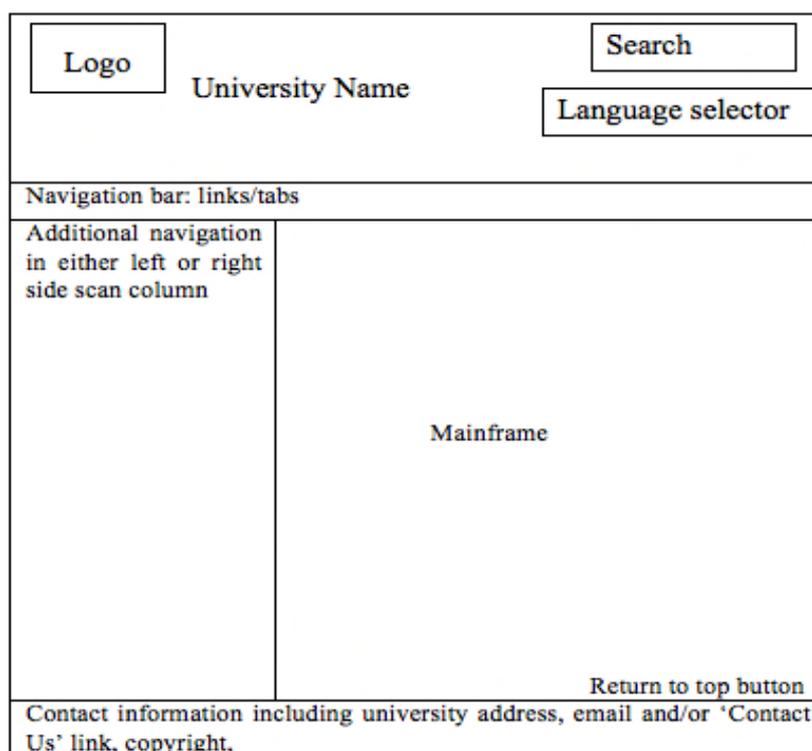


Figure 1 Basic webpage design and major elements (adapted from Lynch & Horton's (2008) Page Structure and Site Design, n.p.)

its site. However, it should be remembered that this choice is also in part based on what the institution can offer. This suggests that it is the HEI's prerogative, and not protocol that dictates what information appears on a specific website. If this is the case, then it suggests that the Japanese HEIs that are more capable of sustaining an international student population would offer specific information concerning studying in Japan more readily through the navigation links available on their websites. The international student would be interested in tuition, admission/ entrance examinations, accommodation, visa, program and course overview, and supervisors. Particularly, the international student in Japan to complete their post graduate research would be interested in the areas of research interests for possible supervisors, so as to see the alignment of their respective areas of study. Accordingly, the connotation of the FLHs at Japanese HEIs that can provide and direct potential international students to pertinent information would be of an institution that has incorporated the ethos of the internationalization of HEI within their infrastructure. However, the connotation of the institutions that have not done this is opposite; the institution has not incorporated the ethos of internationalization.

#### 4. Trends: The structure and design of FLHs

The FLH, as a site of meaning making, with regards to the incorporation of internationalization ethos, can only gain its meaning in relation to other FLHs. Accordingly, this section will present the common trends in the semiotic analysis of

FLHs according to rank. Using webometrics, a website that not only provides a relational ranking of all Japanese HEIs, whether they be four-year universities, graduate schools, two-year colleges, or technical/ trade schools, available from <<http://www.webometrics.info/en/Asia/Japan>> a sampling analysis of the 989 HEIs was completed. Approximately every third FLH was assessed on this website. If an institution was a junior college (a two year institution) or specialized in a specific area, such as early childhood education, which might require requalification in the international student's home nation, the next institution was assessed. This enabled an assessment of the common trends and outliers in FLH construction at Japanese HEIs in relation to each other. This section will describe the trends according to rank the ranks of low (660-989), mid (330-659), and high (1-329).

#### **4.1 The FLH at Lower-Ranking Institutions**

The most significant trend at this level is for a HEI to only have a Japanese homepage. All the institutions have a well-developed Japanese homepage which offers readers of Japanese detailed information regarding programs, specific courses with these programs, faculty, a calendar of events, student support, finances/aid, and examinations, as well as noting a last update such. This is found even at institutions which focus on international studies. The level of the develop of the Japanese language homepage is of significance, as it does aim to inform students not only about the institution, but also what their life as a university student would be like. The Japanese language homepage offers extensive support to the Japanese-speaking student. This is in stark contrast to the extent of development of the FLHs at these institutions.

Many lower ranking institutions did not have a FLH. When a FLH was present, it was usually in English. In the higher end of this category Chinese, both traditional and simplified, and Korean FLHs also were seen, however, these were in addition to the English homepage, never on their own. When a FLH was not present, occasionally the main navigation links had English translations below the Japanese. This could be understood as the institution making an effort to direct international users to specific information, which they could subsequently use their own initiative to use an online translation machines to translation pertinent information. However, a very few institutions that had a navigation link to an English homepage, that did not actually connect the user to a functioning webpage. Instead when connected to the FLH the user finds an "Under Construction" message. At other institutions the link to the FLHs is not traditionally placed in the upper right hand corner. Rather the language link is hidden within the mainframe or the left/right-side scan columns. Several lower-ranking institutions had extensively developed FLH in English, and also in Chinese or Korean, however the navigation link to these pages is hidden within another link in the left- or right-hand scan columns of the mainframe. These navigation links are often titled in large Japanese letters, with an English title in much smaller font such as "International Admissions" or "International Activities" or "Study Abroad". Unless the international user is aware of what to look for, it is unlikely that they would find the FLH at these institutions. It is interesting to note that several institutions also resisted to fully translating the name of their institution. Compass directions such as east (*higashi*), or south (*kita*) were not translated. For example *Higashiosaka* College's name should translate into English as '*East Osaka College*', but it remains as *Higashiosaka*, all as one word, not two. Further more the use of '*Jo*' is also not

always translated. The Japanese kanji 女 (*Jo*) refers to woman. Instead of translating the HEI's name as (Name) Women's College, *Jo* is used instead of women's, as exemplified by Seisen *Jo-Gakuin* College. The term "*Gakuin*" is commonly used in Japan to refer to educational institution that accepts students nationwide, and does not translate directly into English. This could be symbolic of Hashimoto's (2013) comment that in selective translation, Japan is creating a distance between itself and others in its internationalization process.

If an institution at this lower-ranking level has a FLH, the content appears to be upload versions of the institution's brochure. The information available is typically in English, and is basic in block format. Additionally, the English used was often not proofread, and contained many grammatical errors. Less than 10 of the sampled institutions at this level had a navigation directed towards the international student. One of these entitled their link '*For Foreign People*'. Yet, the information provided for the international student rarely included admission/ entrance examinations. Furthermore these FLH did not contain information regarding tuition, accommodation, visa, program and course overview, and supervisors. At this level the FLHs can be said to underdeveloped, with information that is not aimed at attracting and including the international students, rather it aims to tell the international user about the institution. The message at this level is clear, if an international student wants to attend these institutions they must be competent in Japanese.

#### **4.2 The FLH at Mid-Ranking Institutions**

The trends found within the lower-ranking institutions continue at the mid-ranking level, most particularly with those institutions at the mid- to lower-end of this bracket. Here it is still common to find institutions without FLHs. Furthermore, several of these institutions did not even have the name of their institution written in the Roman alphabet on the Japanese homepage; the institution's name only appeared in Japanese kanji. From the mid- to higher-end of this level, it however is increasingly common for an institution to have uploaded information in block formation, like an electronic brochure, or PDF files not only in English, but also in Chinese and Korean. Occasionally, other languages also appeared, such as Spanish, Portuguese, Vietnamese, or Russian. These additional languages were always in addition to Chinese and Korean, not instead of. These language navigation links often did not appear in the standardized upper right-hand corner of the top page, but were found in the left or right-hand scan columns within the mainframe of the Japanese homepage. Moreover, when a mid-level institution does have a FLH, but when they have only one language choice for their FLH, this page will appear in English. The language navigation links were either indicated all in English, written in the signifying language, or denoted by a symbol such as a flag or a globe. This is distinctly different from the lower part of this category and the lower-ranking institutions where if an institution had a FLH it was most likely to be in English only.

At the mid- to higher-end of the mid ranking institution other trends became noticeable. Several institutions did have a FLH, however there was not link to the FLH from the Japanese homepage. A link to a FLH could only be found if the name of the university was searched for through an online search engine such as Google. Furthermore, within specific sub-sections of the FLH information was often minimal. Some institutions invited international students interested in *International Exchange*

to either email or telephone the administration. While these institutions provide an email address and telephone number, they do not offer specific information on their FLH so that students and first acquaint themselves with some ideas before making contact. The FLHs at these institutions only provide contact information. However at other institutions “Coming soon” messages for sub-navigation links can still be found. This surprisingly happens at institutions with the term ‘International University’ in their name. Like the lower-ranking level, the FLHs at most mid-ranking institutions still aim to inform prospective international students about their institution. There rarely appears information regarding fee and application procedures, dormitories, or classes that international students must complete. Even when a HEI appears to be proffering information regarding Entrance Examinations, the international user will find that this information is a list of numbers of students who have enrolled at the institution or that the navigation link connects the user to information on a Japanese language page. Additionally, Google generated translations of the entire Japanese website is also found at this level particularly at the mid- to lower-end.

At the mid-ranking level, something that was not found extensively at the lower level is confirmation of the institution’s accreditation. Most universities place the seal from different accreditation agencies such as Japan Institution for Higher Education Evaluation (JIHEE), Japan Association for College Accreditation (JACA), or Japan Accreditation Board for Engineering Education (JABEE), visibly on the Japanese top homepage, several also make reference to this in the block information that appears within the FLHs. Yet the actual information directed to the international student remains skeletal. It is not until the higher-ranking mid-level institutions that slightly tailored information of international students begins to appear on the FLH. Furthermore, within the higher-ranking institutions of this level, many distinctly state that students must have a command of Japanese in order to attend classes. Even at the more developed FLH of the mid-ranking institutions, when information does appear, it is minimal, appearing in block formation with little interaction with international students. These institutions are clearly stating which type of international student is welcome to attend: the student with Japanese proficiency. However, the same could be said at other institutions when they provided limited amounts of information in block format, with nothing directed specifically for the international student, or when navigation links to pertinent information for students takes the users to a Japanese language page only. These institutions are also clearly outlining, that without a high command of Japanese, international students will be limited in their formation of their student identity and their functioning as university students.

### **4.3 The FLH at High-Ranking Institutions**

Within the higher-ranking institutions, the most distinct variations could be seen within this division. The FLH at the lower end of this rank were likely to have only an English FLH. As with the other ranks, often these FLHs provided users with statistical information concerning graduation rates, employment success, a geographical breakdown of the international student population or international relationships, the history of the university, a vision/ goals statement, and a message from the president. Furthermore, it was still common to find the navigation link to the FLH in untraditional places such as in the left of the header bar or within the mainframe. It was rarely found that no link to a FLH was available from the Japanese homepage. Within this occasionally, there was a FLH, and access to this page could only be

found through a search engine such as Google. The connotation here is that the institution is still aiming to inform others about it, but the institution is not directly welcoming others with its framework. The accreditation seals, which were very prominent in the mid-ranking level universities, appear less frequently, and almost not at all within the top 100 institutions. These appear to have been replaced with navigation links to social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, RSS, or Line. This demonstrates that these institutions know how to connect to students, and are aware of changes in the way students use the social media to gain information. These institutions are appearing to be technologically with it.

The lower-ranking universities within this higher-ranking category still cram much information onto the top FLH, in large blocks. It is not until the highest 100 institutions that several levels of animated photos, which are links to specific subpages begin to take prominence over the sterile background which is divided into blocks with headline type links. Within these institutions, the top page of the FLH appears less cluttered, and more organized. This organization is key, as it appears as if thought went into the process of constructing the FLH and directing the user to pertinent information. This symbolizes an institution that is interested in its prospective international student population. Yet, this symbolization dissipates quickly, as often the sub-navigation links take users to PDF files which appear to be uploaded versions of the university handbook/ brochure. An uploaded brochure on an institution's FLH is not providing prospective or current international students with additional information, as these brochures generally lack substance in the information provided. Students are looking for specific details, not shallow descriptions. How and the degree to which information is presented is a symbolization of the degree to which the international student would be supported by the HEI. Furthermore, as in the lower two rankings most high-ranking institutions only have one FLH in English. It is not until the top 50 institutions that FLHs in Chinese or Korean, always appear, despite the fact that most of the international students in Japan are from China and Korea (Huang, 2006). Moreover, throughout this level in general only a few institutions provided an actual contact name and email address for prospective users to make contact with. Many institutions provide an email address to the student administration department, but they do not provide a contact name. This is unfortunate, as it does not facilitate in developing a human contact with prospective international students. Furthermore, the main navigation links do not always direct the user to pertinent information. Prospective students interested in the admission process, fees or general course overview, will find the information if they pursue, but this information is often accessed through several layers of sub-navigation links.

From around the highest 160 ranking institutions, information uploaded on the FLH regularly appears to be divided according to user: the prospective student, current student, alumni, researcher, and occasionally parent/ guardian. While the sub-navigation links may connect users to the same information page, the names of these links have been constructed to quickly direct the user to information that they are searching for. The connotation of this, is that the institution cares about its users, and is not only willing but is able to help its users find the information they require. This connotation however, is lost when the sub-link connects the user to a Japanese page, or they receive a message 'Under construction'. It is not until the top 80 institutions that information specifically for the prospective international student is easily found, including tuition, accommodation, visa, admission/ entrance examinations,

scholarships, and basic overview of programs and courses. However, even the most high-ranking institutions do not provide detailed information regarding their faculty, the courses they teach, and their research interests. Many international students in Japan are in Japan on scholarships from the Japanese government (Phan, 2013), and are doing graduate level research. For these students it is essential that they find a supervisor who has the capacity to mentor them in their research area. Thus while it appears that the higher-ranking institutions are aware of their international students' information needs, they have yet to fully incorporate this into their FLHs. It is interesting to note that the institutions with the most developed FLHs are also amongst Japan's oldest institutions. These institutions have had a long international outlook, and not only have historical international academic relations, but have used this knowledge to develop their infrastructure to support international students.

#### **4.4 Summary of Trends**

The FLHs of Japanese HIEs are not fully developed to support its international student body information needs. The FLHs at the mid- to lower-end of the higher-ranking institutions appear similar to those at the mid- to lower-ranking institutions. The goal appears to symbolic expression of the institution within the realm of the globalization of HE. It is not until the higher-end of the higher-ranking institutions, which also tend to historically been research orientated institutions, and/ or medical or scientific institutions, that the FLHs appear to have been constructed with the goal to inform prospective international students about what they can achieve at that institution. Due to their orientation these institutions have had time to incorporate the ethos of internationalization within their infrastructure, and this is displayed on their FLHs. However, if the goal of the FLH is to attract international students, the FLHs at these institutions still require additional development. This would necessitate that the HEI understands why international students have chosen to study in Japan, so that it can tailor specific information to these students. In the global HE arena, many institutions are aiming to attract an international student body. Unless Japanese institutions pay attention to the information needs of its potential international students body, these students will eventually turn to other countries for their HEI.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Only a select few of the highest-ranking institutions have the most developed FLHs. These FLHs offer students specific information designed to help them make informed decisions as to whether or not to apply to this institution. This is reflective of the infrastructure of these institutions to support international students. Many lower-ranking institutions did not have a FLH, and this is a trend which continues right through to the mid-ranking institutions. Furthermore, when these mid- to lower-ranking institutions did have a FLH it was most likely to be in English, only one (long) page, consist of PDF files, or uploaded content from the institution's brochure. This trend also continued until throughout the higher-ranking institutions. The significant of these institution's FLHs is that they are a sign of the degree to which the ethos of the internationalization of HE is valued by Japanese HE. The fact that these institutions do not provide even the most basic information about themselves in another language, yet the Japanese homepage contains a wealth of information is a sign to the international student. The sign is that to be a functioning university student, you must have a high command of Japanese if you want to study in Japan.

This sign value is consistent with the way that Japanese educational policy development has traditionally embraced English as a foreign language. It appears, as Hashimoto (2013) states that Japanese HE is reacting to the global society, instead of becoming active members within that society (p. 24). Instead of embracing global HE through encouraging international students to attend Japanese HEIs, the FLHs are displays of how Japanese HE has reacted to the globalization of HE. By uploading English displays of internationalization, where information is limited, incorrect, or inconsequential to prospective international students, the FLH instead becomes a representation of an infrastructure that is unwilling to embrace and develop ethos of internationalization with its tertiary education to the development of both the international and national student body.

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