

A Preliminary Exploration of Symbolic Representation and Meaning in Academic Conferences

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ABSTRACT

The symbolic construction of academic conferences is embodied in meticulous planning across both temporal and spatial dimensions. In the temporal dimension, the preparation cycle for a conference can span months or even a year or two, encompassing a series of stages such as issuing notifications, inviting experts, soliciting papers, evaluating submissions, compiling manuals, arranging agendas, and coordinating transportation and accommodation. This process resembles Roman Jakobson's concept of the syntactic axis of signs, where the apparent orderliness of procedures masks the diverse choices embedded in each step, collectively forming a latent paradigmatic axis of sign selection. The former (the syntactic axis) is overt, while the latter (the paradigmatic axis) remains hidden behind the scenes. Spatially, academic conferences exhibit a rich hierarchy of symbols, encompassing the selection of venues, the distinction between primary and secondary venue layouts, the convenience of transportation, the furnishing within venues, visual elements like backdrops and logos, and the configuration of podiums. The symbolic system of academic conferences is both a system of meanings derived from past institutions, beliefs, values, and behaviors, and an interactive symbolic system generating present meanings.

KEYWORDS

conference; academic conference; symbol; semiotics; Conference semiotics

Tu Youguang's "Pickle Theory" and Jia Pingwa's "Dye Vat Analogy" both profoundly illustrate the subtle shaping and influencing effects that a symbolized environment has on individuals. Effective teachers are those who utilize apt metaphors, and academic conferences, similarly, resemble a meticulously crafted hall of symbols where students are gradually immersed in symbolic culture. This process occurs silently yet exerts a profound influence. The symbolic environment not only embodies the behavioral norms and standards of academia but also subtly integrates the symbolism of political power, the pursuit of academic ideals, and the order of administrative management. These elements collectively enhance the efficiency, subtlety, and sophistication of symbolization, making academic conferences vital platforms for fostering knowledge exchange and cultural transmission.

1 Semiotics as a framework for conference analysis

The semiotics of meetings possesses a rich theoretical resource base, encompassing concepts such as Peirce's logical-rhetorical semiotics of "marked items" and "segmentation," Bourdieu's political semiotics of "symbolic capital" and "symbolic environment," Lotman's cultural semiotics

focusing on "meaning" and "interpretation," Baudrillard's consumer semiotics of "conspicuous consumption" and "trademarks," Mead's symbolic interactionism, and Jakobson's double-axis theory of significance. All these theories can be applied within the context of meetings. Indeed, educational semiotician Bernstein, drawing upon Saussure's linguistic semiotics and Cassirer's social semiotics, explored the relationship between signs, meaning, culture, and even power. Through empirical research, he uncovered the underlying social issues implicated in symbolic reference. Bernstein argues that the upper class employs refined symbols, while the lower class is confined to restricted ones. The former, being subtle, abstract, and polite, masks control and inequality; the latter, being straightforward and superficial, reveals submissiveness and subjugation. (Zhou Min, Hou Huaiyin. 2016) The official-oriented orientation, hierarchical conference organization, and uneven distribution of power within the academic conference field can all be interpreted through the lens of semiotics.

Greimas' Semiotic Square, formulated by French structuralist semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas, serves as a methodological tool for analyzing the meaning of symbols and their interrelationships. It particularly illuminates the potential ambiguity and deception that symbols may evoke in the process of information transmission. Through its four fundamental categories and their interconnections, Greimas' Semiotic Square offers a profound tool for exploring the complexities of symbolic meaning operations. It not only reveals the diverse states symbols can adopt in conveying information but also aids in recognizing the logical relationships and underlying meanings behind these states, thereby enhancing our accuracy and comprehension of the messages conveyed by symbols.

Academic conferences are ideally designed to serve as platforms for the exchange of viewpoints, the collision of ideas, and the collective exploration of truth. However, the actual situation frequently falls short of this ideal. To put it bluntly, how much genuinely valuable knowledge is actually imparted in real-world academic conferences? Some conferences may appear lively on the surface, yet they resemble bubbles, glossy in appearance but devoid of substantial content, thereby revealing an intriguing manipulation of symbols occurring behind the scenes. The symbolic performances or the misuse of symbols at academic conferences constitute merely superficial phenomena. The true underlying cause of the problem lies with those who manipulate these symbols, namely, the bureaucratism embedded within professional societies. Of course, the deeper reasons behind this phenomenon stem from the highly centralized institutional framework and the overly utilitarian cultural milieu.

2 Ceremonial Etiquette in Conference Symbolism

Conference Semiotics primarily deals with the issues of symbolic forms and meaning expression within conferences. The symbolic forms in conferences are predominantly manifested as rituals, wherein the symbols embedded in conference rituals serve operational, interpretive, and positional functions. (Zhao Yiheng. 2010.) The spatial arrangement of symbols inherently conveys a diversity of symbolic meanings, encompassing the types and structures of symbols within the conference agenda, as well as the various levels and layouts of these symbols. In a conference venue, static and dynamic symbols converge to form a symbolic domain or milieu, within which the specific milieu cultivates a distinctive conference style. The different symbolic elements within this milieu, their mutual relationships, and their structures all convey varied connotations. For instance, pyramid schemes are adept at leveraging conference symbols to create momentum: exuberant background music, idealistic stage curtains, triumphant speakers, meticulously presented wealth data, and the CEO's entourage, all contributing to the brainwashing of numerous college students. The structural

configurations comprised of various modal symbols express implicit or unspoken meanings. When authority and leadership need to be emphasized, the conference stage is elevated, visually and metaphorically dominating over all participants. Conversely, to convey the symbolic meanings of amicable negotiation and equal communication, round-table configurations are often adopted—a table without sharp edges, which is not merely a physical object but a symbol that dissipates opposition and conflict.

Many academic conferences today, while ostensibly exploring truth and respecting academic exchanges and dialogues, are in reality engaged in resource allocation and interest transfers, exemplifying a symbolic operation that is "similar in appearance but not in essence." Furthermore, there exist outright fake academic conferences, where every aspect—from the seating arrangement to the opening ceremony, keynote speeches, and group photos—exudes an air of sycophancy and pandering to officials. Unscrupulous politicians, devoid of academic merit, shamelessly recite bland official speeches in prestigious academic halls, often occupying the most prominent positions at the front, center, or on the stage. As soon as the group photos are taken, they disperse like birds and animals. When it comes to actual academic discussions, the venue is left virtually empty. Xu Jilin argues that after being politically marginalized during the Cultural Revolution and economically marginalized at the beginning of reform and opening-up, Chinese scholars have effectively left their independent and free spiritual homes, becoming institutionalized and subordinate to the modern knowledge system. (Xue Xiaoyang, 2006.) A large number of scholars have abandoned the public concern of "establishing moral principles for the world, securing a destiny for the people, continuing the tradition of the past sages, and founding an era of great peace for all generations", and have regarded professional societies and academic conferences as a battleground for fame and fortune.

3 Symbolic performance in academic conferences

Academic conferences, as symbolic performances showcasing academic identity, exhibit typical characteristics of general ceremonial events. They express academic power through the allocation of time and space, seating arrangements, and process control. This manifestation is evident in various aspects, including arrangements for scholars' transportation and accommodation, standards for pick-up services and catering, amounts of lecture honoraria, timing of appearances at conferences, order and duration of presentations, seating arrangements, positioning in group photographs, and even arrangements for cultural tours and recreational activities following the conference. All these aspects utilize symbolic indicators to display distinct identities. Each academic conference serves as a production and reproduction of symbolic power. Through institutionalization and standardization processes, academic conferences, year after year, invisibly reinforce the legitimacy and authority of symbolic power, thereby disciplining scholars and fostering their academic identity. (Zhang Bin, 2012.) This creates a symbolic illusion for young scholars and students, who mistakenly believe that symbolic performance in bustling academic conferences is the essence of academia itself, and equate this symbolic identity with their academic identity. This is also a dire consequence of the "bigger officials, bigger knowledge" and "official-centered cultural hegemony" mindset, making it increasingly difficult for young students to obtain positive guidance from academic conferences. Academic conferences organized by academic institutions are symbolic interaction platforms for intellectuals to jointly pursue truth and engage in exchanges and dialogues. Their fundamental value orientation should be freedom, equality, and sincerity, rather than manipulating elaborate symbols to exacerbate inequality.

Nowadays, with the widespread adoption of the internet, the symbolic expressions of the academic community have evolved into new forms, such as QQ groups, WeChat groups, and

DingTalk groups. The semantic equivalence of physical academic organizations reflects that of virtual academic organizations in cyberspace. The more specialized and conventional they are, the more symbolic distinctions and prominence they exhibit, making it challenging for outsiders to integrate. These groups typically enforce a unified real-name system, requiring members to append their names in the format of "Name + Research Direction + Institution." Compared to traditional physical academic conferences held in physical spaces, these virtual academic organizations, engaging in symbolic expressions, demonstrate higher levels of activity and longer-lasting influence. Discussions on specific academic issues tend to be more profound, casual, and unconstrained, devoid of the awkwardness of face-to-face debates or rigid hierarchical identities present in physical conferences. This environment encourages participants to engage freely and express their opinions openly; however, occasionally, newcomers may forget their place, adopting a blunt tone, particularly towards esteemed scholars in the field. In such cases, despite being challenged, the latter often adopt a magnanimous attitude, choosing not to retaliate. However, it is crucial to note that cyberspace, as a doubly symbolized environment, contrasts with the primarily symbolized realm of physical existence. Physical academic organizations enjoy greater stability, with leadership often remaining unchanged for decades, whereas virtual academic groups tend to be re-established annually for each conference, due to the changing nature of hosting responsibilities. Despite the financial losses incurred in organizing academic conferences, the academic community eagerly pursues these events as they offer symbolic resources—enhancing academic discourse power, securing resource allocation rights, expanding identity visibility, and fostering scholarly networks.

High-end academic conferences initiate with two crucial political symbols: firstly, the directive "All rise, please sing the national anthem"; secondly, a keynote speech delivered by a prominent official, whose political standing emphasizes the symbolic importance of the occasion. The emphasis on these political symbols underscores their inherent universal applicability, precedence, and authority within the socialist system with Chinese characteristics. Scholars, endowed with cultural capital, are integrated into a symbolic community centered on shared political symbols. This symbolic community originates from political domination, which is perpetuated through various institutional frameworks that mandate a ubiquitous acknowledgment of dominant symbols. Drawing on the theoretical insights of social semiotician Pierre Bourdieu, political symbols can readily transform into a manifestation of symbolic violence, thereby reinforcing social hierarchy. These symbols internalize and mold existing social structures into individual mental frameworks, effectively reconstructing societal norms. Consequently, the role of political symbols is to replicate social structures, functioning as a conduit of power for certain scholars and constituting a form of capital within academic conferences. This capital establishes a hierarchical order within academic organizations by stratifying scholars and participants, which subsequently translates into other forms of capital for personal advancement. The insidious and covert nature of symbolic violence within academic conferences and professional societies renders all participants unwitting accomplices in symbolic performances. (Cui Gaopeng, Kang Shaofang, 2015.)

Academic conferences frequently endeavor to invite governmental officials to their opening ceremonies, as these officials inherently embody significant political symbols. In cases where officials are burdened with an extensive array of paperwork and meetings, they may delegate surrogates to attend in their stead. Even if unversed in the academic domain, officials can still capitalize on academic conferences to augment their cultural capital. Typically, administrative officials make a grand entrance amidst thunderous applause, being hailed as "honored guests." Higher-ranking officials often arrive later, delivering perfunctory yet enthusiastic speeches filled with banal platitudes before promptly exiting the venue. Undoubtedly, the most pivotal element—the group photo session—is never omitted, and for many oblivious officials, this photographic

moment serves as the sole impetus for attending academic conferences. The academic community seemingly acquiesces to these staged performances, engaging in symbolic gestures and going through the motions to ensure that all parties are satisfied. It would be unjust to accuse conference organizers or scholars of mere sycophancy, as institutional and cultural factors constitute the underlying codes that contribute to the alienation of academic conferences. Culture is perpetually engaged in a struggle for symbolic power, and once a "marked term" or "unmarked term" secures the meaning power carried by the "medium term," it establishes itself as the dominant or positive term. (Peng Jia.2017.)

The objects of contention within the academic domain encompass both material resources (such as projects, awards, research facilities, stipends, and so forth) and symbolic resources (including reputation, rankings, titles, and so on). The distribution of academic resources serves as a manifestation of the reality of stratification and the power hierarchy that exists within the academic field. (Zhang Bin, Zhang Chuting.2015.) The right of allocation or discourse power is essentially a symbolic power grounded in academic identity and political status. Clark asserts that reputation serves as the currency in the academic field, with scholars primarily competing for it. However, this reputation must be validated and manifested within an appropriate symbolic context through symbolic operations and performances. Academic conferences provide such a context, facilitating precise, efficient, and subtle symbolic operations through the spatial layout of the venue and temporal allocation within the conference agenda. Certain high-stakes conferences, such as those involving evaluations for academic appointments, provincial and ministerial achievement awards, national project evaluations, and job title assessments, are particularly secretive. Notably, publicly available videos of their proceedings are scarce, despite their academic conference nature. Furthermore, those who do not achieve the desired outcomes often receive little feedback, reasons, or suggestions for improvement.

4 Conclusion

The bureaucratization, politicization, and symbolization of professional societies and academic conferences are difficult to eradicate in the short term within the existing cultural and institutional framework. This is due to the intertwined and competitive nature among academic, administrative, and political powers, ultimately leading to politics overshadowing all other concerns. For Chinese academia to achieve academic excellence, it is imperative to restore the priority of academic pursuits and break the monopoly of academic resources. Professional societies, which are merely administrative extensions of their affiliated institutions rather than truly independent academic organizations, fundamentally hinder academic independence. The resource monopoly inherent in the centralized system perpetuates academia's subordinate position, suppressing its intrinsic value while enhancing its instrumental value. Consequently, societies and academia find it difficult to stand on their own, and scholars naturally encounter challenges in prioritizing academic pursuits. The fundamental value orientation of legitimate academic institutional construction should be to safeguard the autonomy of scholars' research. The longstanding issue of excessive administrative power in China's current academic institutional arrangements poses a significant threat to the entire academic enterprise. Implementing the concept of academic democracy within the existing institutional arrangements represents a pragmatic and rational approach to institutional improvement. (Yan Guangcai.2005.)

Academic conferences serve as the symbolic context where professional societies express their identities. They provide scholars with a stage to engage in symbolic performances. Scholars possess a high degree of symbolic representation and practical ability, showcasing their aspirations and

metaphors through abstract symbols. Naturally, scholars embody certain connotations, such as independent spirit, social conscience, and free thought. As Mannheim noted, "Intellectuals have emancipated themselves from the upper classes and evolved into relatively independent groups, promoting the prosperity of free intellect and cultural life." In social interactions and collective memory, scholars' symbolic identity is consistently associated with concepts of erudition, independence, kindness, and profundity, granting them an identity and cultural superiority that gradually evolves into a form of "social capital." (Guo Xiao'an, Yang Shaoting. 2018.)

Genuine scholars should aspire to truth, diligently study, build a solid foundation, and embrace innovation, rather than conforming to popular trends or ingratiating themselves with the powerful. When attending academic conferences, they won't merely go out of obligation, nor utter clichés or engage in idle chatter devoid of substance. Without these principles, even renowned scholars as spectators would merely serve as a facade, enhancing superficial appearances and wasting everyone's time.

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