

kenneth burke language as symbolic action 1

kenneth burke language as symbolic action 1 profoundly reshaped our understanding of communication, positing that language is not merely a tool for conveying information but a fundamental form of human action. This foundational concept, central to Burke's rhetorical theory, explores how we use symbols to navigate our social world, identify with others, and motivate ourselves and our audiences. This article delves into the core tenets of Kenneth Burke's theory of language as symbolic action, examining its implications for rhetoric, social interaction, and identity formation. We will explore the meaning of symbolic action, its relationship to drama, and how this framework helps us analyze the persuasive power of language.

Understanding Kenneth Burke's Concept of Language as Symbolic Action

What is Symbolic Action? The Core of Burke's Theory

Kenneth Burke's seminal work posits that language, at its heart, is symbolic action. This means that when we speak, write, or use any form of symbolic expression, we are not simply describing reality; we are actively doing something with our words. These actions are symbolic because they represent something beyond themselves, acting as surrogates for physical actions. For Burke, human beings are "symbol-using animals," and our engagement with symbols is intrinsically tied to our ability to form societies, create meaning, and engage in persuasion. The very act of using language is a way of shaping our reality and influencing the actions of others.

The concept of symbolic action highlights the performative nature of language. Every utterance, from a casual greeting to a political speech, carries an inherent potential for action. This action might be subtle, like establishing rapport, or overt, like inciting rebellion. Burke emphasizes that these symbolic actions are rooted in human motivation and the desire to resolve internal or external conflicts. By understanding language as action, we move beyond a purely referential view of communication and embrace its dynamic, consequential nature.

The Dramatistic Pentad: A Tool for Analyzing Symbolic Action

To dissect and understand the multifaceted nature of symbolic action, Kenneth Burke developed the Dramatistic Pentad. This analytical framework, borrowed from dramatic theory, provides a structured way to examine the components of any given situation or utterance. It helps us uncover the underlying motivations and the way agents use language to achieve their purposes. The pentad consists of five inter-related elements: Agent, Act, Agency, Scene, and Purpose.

- **Agent:** Who is performing the action? This refers to the individual or group speaking or acting.
- **Act:** What action is being performed? This is the deed itself, the verbal or symbolic behavior.

- **Agency:** Through what means is the action performed? This refers to the tools, methods, or channels used for communication.
- **Scene:** Where and when does the action take place? This encompasses the context, environment, and circumstances surrounding the action.
- **Purpose:** Why is the action being performed? This delves into the motivations, intentions, and goals behind the symbolic act.

By analyzing the interplay between these five elements, one can gain a deeper appreciation for the strategic use of language and the complex motivations driving communication. For instance, a political campaign speech can be analyzed to understand the candidate (Agent), their policy proposals (Act), the media channels used (Agency), the current political climate (Scene), and their electoral goals (Purpose).

Language as Identification: Burke's Concept of Consubstantiality

A crucial aspect of Kenneth Burke's theory is the idea of identification, which he terms "consubstantiality." This concept explains how we use language to establish common ground and create a sense of shared identity with others. When we communicate, we often employ language that resonates with the experiences, values, and beliefs of our audience, thereby fostering a feeling of kinship and unity. This is not about being literally the same, but about finding symbolic overlap.

Burke argued that persuasion, or the process of moving an audience, is achieved through identification. When an audience identifies with a speaker, they are more likely to accept the speaker's message and be moved to action. This identification can be fostered through various linguistic strategies, such as shared terminology, common experiences, or appealing to collective values. It's a fundamental driver of social cohesion and a powerful engine of rhetorical influence. Language becomes the bridge that connects disparate individuals and groups, forging bonds of understanding and solidarity.

The Burkean View of Rhetoric: Persuasion Through Symbolic Action

For Kenneth Burke, rhetoric is not simply about the art of beautiful speech; it is inextricably linked to the concept of symbolic action and identification. He viewed rhetoric as the use of language as a means of inducing cooperation in beings by a "festive or strategic unveiling of substance." This means that persuasion is achieved by appealing to the shared substance of people's identities and motivations. The rhetorician, through their symbolic actions, aims to build bridges of consubstantiality with their audience.

Burke's perspective is deeply rooted in the understanding that human beings are divided, and it is through symbolic action that we seek to overcome these divisions. Rhetoric, in this light, is the mechanism through which we manage division and achieve cooperation. It involves strategically using language to align the interests and values of the speaker with those of the audience, creating a sense of shared purpose and mutual understanding. This process is not necessarily manipulative, but rather

a fundamental aspect of human social interaction and the formation of communities.

The Role of Guilt and Redemption in Symbolic Action

Kenneth Burke also explored the pervasive influence of "guilt" within human experience and its role in symbolic action. For Burke, guilt is not always about moral transgression; it's a broader term encompassing any form of unease, anxiety, or division that humans experience. This can arise from social hierarchies, personal failings, or the very nature of being a symbol-using animal in a complex world. Language, as symbolic action, becomes a primary tool for both creating and alleviating this guilt.

The process of symbolic action often involves a cycle of guilt and redemption. We might use language to confess our perceived failings, thereby alleviating guilt. Conversely, language can also be used to assign guilt to others, a form of symbolic action aimed at establishing social order or achieving strategic advantage. The ultimate goal in this cycle, according to Burke, is often a form of redemption—a cleansing or purification from this pervasive guilt, allowing for a renewed sense of order and belonging within a community.

Analyzing Discourse Through the Lens of Symbolic Action

Kenneth Burke's framework provides a powerful lens for analyzing various forms of discourse, from literature and philosophy to political speeches and everyday conversations. By applying the principles of symbolic action, we can move beyond surface-level meaning and uncover the deeper motivations, social dynamics, and persuasive strategies at play in any communicative act. This approach encourages a critical engagement with language, recognizing its capacity to shape our perceptions and influence our actions.

When examining texts or speeches through the lens of symbolic action, one might consider:

- What are the primary symbolic actions being performed?
- How is the audience being invited to identify with the speaker?
- What specific linguistic strategies are employed to foster consubstantiality?
- How do the elements of the Dramatistic Pentad interact to shape the meaning and impact of the communication?
- What forms of guilt are being evoked or resolved through the discourse?

By asking these questions, we can gain a more profound understanding of how language functions not just to convey information, but to actively construct our social realities and guide our behavior.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Kenneth Burke's core concept of 'language as symbolic action'?

Kenneth Burke's core concept, 'language as symbolic action,' posits that language is not merely a tool for conveying information but a fundamental human activity that shapes our reality, motivations, and social interactions. We act through language, using symbols to persuade, identify, and create shared meaning, thereby influencing both ourselves and others.

How does Burke's theory differentiate language from mere 'information' or 'communication'?

Burke differentiates language from mere information by emphasizing its inherent actional quality. While communication might simply transmit data, symbolic action suggests that the act of using language is itself a deliberate choice that produces consequences, altering perceptions, fostering solidarity, or creating division. Language is a mode of doing, not just saying.

What is the significance of 'identification' in Burke's 'language as symbolic action'?

Identification is paramount in Burke's theory. He argues that we are drawn to and persuaded by those with whom we feel a sense of shared identity. Language is the primary vehicle for creating this identification by emphasizing commonalities, values, or goals, allowing us to unite with others through shared symbolic frameworks.

How can 'guilt' be understood within the framework of symbolic action?

Burke views 'guilt' broadly, encompassing not just moral transgression but any sense of pollution, imperfection, or falling short of an ideal or standard, often created by our own symbolic systems. Language is crucial in both creating and purging this guilt, through confession, absolution, or the scapegoating of others, all of which are symbolic actions.

What are some key rhetorical strategies Burke identifies as forms of symbolic action?

Key rhetorical strategies include division and subdivision (creating hierarchies), synecdoche (part for whole, to create identification), metaphor (bridging disparate ideas), and the use of terministic screens (language shaping perception). These are all ways we use symbols to act upon the world and ourselves.

How does Burke's concept apply to political discourse and persuasion?

In political discourse, 'language as symbolic action' highlights how politicians use rhetoric to build

identification with voters, frame issues, and create symbolic victories or defeats. Appeals to shared identity, national pride, or common enemies are all symbolic actions designed to persuade and mobilize.

What is a 'terministic screen' and how does it relate to symbolic action?

A 'terministic screen' is a set of terms or a symbolic framework through which we perceive and interpret reality. It acts as a lens, highlighting certain aspects of experience while obscuring others. Using language is inherently an act of selecting and arranging terms, thus creating a terministic screen that guides our symbolic actions and understanding.

Can you provide an example of language acting as symbolic action in everyday life?

Saying 'we're all in this together' during a crisis is a prime example. It's not just reporting a fact; it's a symbolic action intended to foster solidarity, build identification, and motivate collective behavior. The act of uttering those words aims to create a shared identity and encourage cooperation.

Why is Burke's theory considered relevant to understanding contemporary media and social media?

Burke's theory is highly relevant because media and social media are saturated with symbolic action. Tweets, memes, and online debates are all ways individuals and groups use language to persuade, build identity, create division, and enact social change. Understanding these platforms through the lens of symbolic action helps us decode their persuasive power and impact.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Kenneth Burke's concept of language as symbolic action, with short descriptions:

1. The Dramatistic Playbook: Understanding Human Motivation Through Language

This book explores Burke's "dramatism" as a framework for analyzing human behavior, positing that life itself can be understood as a stage. It delves into how we use language as a form of "symbolic action" to persuade, identify, and navigate social hierarchies. Readers will learn to dissect rhetorical situations and uncover the underlying motivations behind communication.

2. Guilt, Purification, and Redemption: Burke's Rhetoric of Spiritual Warfare

Focusing on Burke's concept of the "scapegoat" and the cyclical nature of guilt and purification, this work examines how language is employed in ideological conflicts. It analyzes how groups use symbolic actions to purge guilt and achieve a state of communal purity. The book offers insights into the persuasive power of narratives that frame societal problems and offer solutions through symbolic cleansing.

3. Identification's Echo: Building Community Through Shared Symbols

This title unpacks Burke's crucial concept of "identification," where language acts as a bridge

connecting individuals and groups. It highlights how shared symbols, values, and experiences, communicated through rhetoric, foster a sense of belonging and solidarity. The book provides a deep dive into the ways language creates and maintains social cohesion.

4. The Art of Persuasion: Kenneth Burke's Tools for Effective Communication

This practical guide offers readers an accessible introduction to Burke's sophisticated rhetorical theories. It breaks down complex concepts like the Pentad and the rhetorical situation into actionable strategies for crafting more persuasive and impactful communication. The book aims to equip individuals with the critical skills to both analyze and produce effective symbolic action.

5. Attitudes of Action: How Language Shapes Belief and Behavior

This book investigates the intrinsic link between language and human conduct as proposed by Burke. It argues that our linguistic choices are not merely descriptive but are actively performative, shaping our attitudes and ultimately influencing our actions. The work explores how symbolic systems can be instrumental in guiding individual and collective behavior.

6. The Rhetoric of War and Peace: Symbolic Strategies in Conflict Resolution

Drawing heavily on Burke's analysis of symbolic action in societal division, this volume examines how language is used to either escalate or de-escalate conflict. It explores the rhetorical strategies employed in diplomacy, propaganda, and peacemaking efforts. The book provides a nuanced understanding of language's role in shaping perceptions of threat and reconciliation.

7. Permanence and Change: Burke's Philosophy of Social Evolution

This title delves into Burke's exploration of how societies evolve through the constant interplay of tradition and innovation, often mediated by language. It examines how symbolic systems adapt and transform to address new challenges and maintain social order. The book offers a framework for understanding societal shifts through the lens of evolving linguistic practices.

8. Terms of Contempt: Language, Othering, and Social Division

This work analyzes how language is used to create "the other" and foster social alienation, a key area of Burke's interest in the divisiveness of symbolic action. It dissects the rhetorical techniques that demonize groups and solidify in-group identity through exclusion. The book explores the ethical implications of using language to create boundaries and reinforce social hierarchies.

9. The Grand Strategist: Kenneth Burke's Rhetoric of Military and Political Discourse

This book applies Burke's theories of symbolic action to the high-stakes arenas of military and political communication. It scrutinizes how leaders use language to mobilize populations, justify actions, and frame national interests. The work offers a critical analysis of the persuasive power of strategic rhetoric in shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions.

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