The making of a festschrift, is it a ritual?

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“The gestures which we sometimes call empty are perhaps in fact the fullest things of all.” (Goffman 1967: 91)

1. Introduction

As has been known at least since the times of Wilhelm von Humboldt, language has two sides, the product (ergon) and the process (energeia). Pragmatics is the study of how to do things with words and it is applied here in a domain where the process is particularly opaque in contrast to the open accessibility of the product. There are hundreds of festschrifts in any university library, but hardly any studies of how festschrifts are made.

According to Goffman (1967: 91), an environment “is a place where it is easy or difficult to play the ritual game of having a self.” In the environment of scientific publications the ceremonial activity of making a festschrift is not undisputed. According to many actors on the scientific market place, festschrifts violate modern scientific order, like, according to Goffman (1967: 141) common criminals offend the property order, traitors the political order, and incestuous couples the kinship order. For the field of geography this is stated plainly in Wirth (1995: 13), who argues that there are not enough good journal publications because renowned authors are urged to write articles for festschrifts. According to Wirth, festschrifts – originally a well justified product of social interaction of scientists – have become an empty ritual (bedeutungsentleertes Ritual) and an annoying routine obligation. Another author portrays festschrifts in an even more radical way as “obscene performances in which someone is declared the party animal (Festsau) so that s/he can be roasted on a spit” (Keazor 2002; translated by the authors).

Such ceremonial profanations of festschrifts are a potential threat to the face of a festschrift editor. It clashes with Goffman’s (1967: 91) postulate that “[t]he environment must ensure that the individual will not pay too high a price for acting with good demeanor and that deference will be accorded him.” In this paper, the conditions and contextualizations of the editors’ activity will be considered, as well as the processes and practices of social interaction that are involved. The basis for our considerations is Iwar Werlen’s definition of the ritual as an expressive institutionalized action or
sequence of actions (“expressive institutionalisierte Handlung oder Handlungsssequenz”, Werlen 1984: 81). We will examine the symbolic nature of the festschrift, yet mostly concentrate on the intentions and the actions performed by the editors that redact a festschrift felicitously or non-defectively in a broader pragmatic sense (cf. Austin 1962, Searle 1969). In doing so, we try to answer the question to what extent the making of a festschrift can be considered a ritual in scientific communities.

We will first engage in a discussion of the two terms “festschrift” and “ritual” (Sections 2 and 3), before possible ritual aspects in the making of a festschrift are examined according to the three major domains “action”, “expressivity”, and “institutionalization” of Werlen’s approach (Section 4). Section 5 is dedicated to the manner of performance, which is especially relevant for festschrifths. Finally, Section 6 presents our concluding remarks to the question “Is the making of a festschrift a ritual?”.

Our method is empirical and we are trying to combine emic and etic accounts, to use the terms of Pike (1967). Being in the process of editing a festschrift ourselves, we can try to monitor our own behavior and understand the underlying reasons. Participant observation is considered a very valuable approach in the study of complex cultures of communication where speech events are not only public and predefinitions may be implicit and therefore not directly accessible (Werlen et al. 1992: 8). A further major source of data is an anonymous electronic questionnaire which has been completed by 31 editors of festschrifths from eight different countries in the field of linguistics and the philologies (1987–2012, 87% of these festschrifths published in the 21th century). An outsider’s perspective is provided by a more festschrift-distant academic population in Vancouver, where students and scientific staff have been asked to provide spontaneous definitions of the term “festschrift”. Finally we use a discourse analytical approach to publicly accessible documents that discuss festschrifths. Interestingly, there is comparatively little public discourse on festschrifths, given that the product itself is a written publication. A major source is Zillig’s (2004) novel *Die Festschrift*. While our material thus assembles a variety of emic accounts (behavior considered meaningful to the actors) it is difficult to arrive at an etic, ‘culturally neutral’ account. In our view this can be approached only by combining a wide range of different data sources with different kinds of actors involved. However, we have to emphasize at this point that there is no neutral point of view when it comes to writing on the topic of festschrifths; the very publication of a paper about festschrifths in a journal (as Wirth 1995) renders the taking of a negative attitude likely. From the point of view of journals, festschrifths are a nuisance. However,
the publication of a paper in a festschrift – as is the case in the present contribution – makes it impossible to take an entirely negative stance.

2. What is a festschrift?

Is the category ‘festschrift’ best conceived of as a classical Aristotelian category with a set of necessary and sufficient properties or is it rather a prototype whose instantiations exhibit family resemblance? To provide an answer to this question, one item in the questionnaire was concerned with the necessary features of a festschrift. Participants were able to select from the following items: tabula gratulatoria, a list of publications of X, a photo of X, a CV of X, the closest relatives of X have to be mentioned, and at least one humorous article (here and in the rest of the text, X refers to the person to be honored by a festschrift). The results displayed in Figure 1 show that festschrift editors do not agree about necessary properties of festschriften.

![Figure 1. Necessary features of a festschrift according to festschrift editors (n=31)](image)

For a festschrift, it seems rather unclear what the true ‘associates’ in the sense of Hawkins (1978: 123) are. One respondent even wrote: “I think there are very little necessary features. Conditions vary from case to case.”

Most informants agree that a photo should be in place. However, it is not obvious what the concrete function of a photo in a festschrift is. Taking into consideration the framework of visual interaction (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996), we can note that the represented participant (the person depicted) is different from the interactive participants (people communicating with each others through images), except in the very special case of the honoree looking at his own picture in the festschrift. How special photos in festschriften are becomes most obvious when considering pictures that
are not well suited for festschriften, such as the photos (a) and (b) in Figure 2. Traditional pictures in festschriften like (c) often show the honoree looking directly at the viewer. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), this may serve the purpose of a relation of admiration for, and identification with, a hero. However, such a relation does not arise, if the honoree is depicted together with two other people having fun at a conference reception as in Figure 2 (a). Another option often chosen is to show the honoree at work. Yet the photo in Figure 2 (b) with the honoree at work discussing different issues with two different people at a conference with an empty glass of wine in his hand is not the kind of photo expected in a festschrift. Such pictures do not evoke connotations of a devotional purpose (cf. Beltling 1990: 57). Needless to say, all three photos are too small for usually-styled photos in a festschrift and this makes them performatively infelicitous and defective (cf. Austin 1962, Searle 1969).

![Figure 2. (a) and (b) Two photos of a honoree not appropriate for a Festschrift, (c) traditional picture in a festschrift](image)

One property often associated with festschriften is the tabula gratulatoria, i.e. a list of colleagues and friends who send their best wishes to the honoree. However, the following quotation shows that one of the authors contacted for a potential contribution did not take for granted that every festschrift contains a tabula.

I’m afraid I am totally overcommitted at the moment...and will not be able to contribute to the Festschrift. I would, however, like to add my name to any tabula gratulatoria that you may wish to include. [our emphasis]

Adding to the confusion is the fact that untypical festschriften are often considered excellent members of the category festschrift. The festschrift refusenik (*Festschriftverweigerer*) Hans-Martin Gauger received a collection of linguistic anecdotes (Koch et al. 1997) for his 60th birthday, which is argued to be a substitute for a festschrift (*Festschriftersatz*), but not a surrogate festschrift (*Ersatzfestschrift*). However, it does contain a tabula grat-
ulatoria. Another linguistic festschrift is termed “eine etwas andere Festschrift” (a somewhat different festschrift) or a “Fastschrift” (germ. fast meaning ‘almost’) and in one case, somebody received a festschrift on the occasion of 65 and a half years, a very special festschrift for a very special person. Finally, the Studies out in left field: defamatory essays presented to James D. McCawley on the occasion of his 33rd or 34th birthday, edited by Zwicky et al. (1971) break a vast number of festschrift conventions.

Examining the spontaneous definitions of four linguistic professors, four PhD students and one graduate student from Vancouver a few recurrent elements can be found:

– the dedication: in honor of, celebration of,
– the status of the honoree: still living (usually well-known) individual, a much-loved scholar, someone who has done a lot of work/important research, respected academic,
– the type of publication: a book, a collection of writings/papers/articles,
– the authors: students (and sometimes colleagues), students and friends, former students and current colleagues.

From this list, the defining element “in honor of”, being mentioned five times, seems to be of great importance. Interestingly, nobody included the occasion for which such a volume is collected. The notion of festschrift thus seems to be neither a classical Aristotelian category nor a prototype since non-prototypical instances are sometimes considered the best instantiations of the category. In a way, it is a rather rainbow-type category: the best member of the category is always out of reach wherever you are.

A very promising line of research in clarifying the notion of festschrift is the diachronic one. For the study of rituals, the making of festschriften is of particular interest because even if their products are books, they are performed without written instructions. This favors unconscious diachronic change: “The illiteracy of the tradition may favor changes in rituals which remain unnoticed by the ritual community” (Werlen 1984: 63).

The only substantial contribution to this field that we are aware of is the pioneering work by Wardenga (1995), who writes about the development of geographical festschriften in Germany from 1893–1968 based on a sample of 117 festschriften. Wardenga identifies three major types of festschriften which form a diachronic chain: disciple-festschrift (D), disciple-and-friends-festschrift (DF) and disciple-friends-and-colleagues-festschrift (DFC). (Note, however, that the traditional Latin name for festschriften – liber amicorum ‘book of friends’ – testifies to the fact that the distinction between disciples and friends is far from clear.) D remains dominant until the 1920s. Its main function is to demonstrate the scientific productivity of
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A school. Symptomatic for this period is that critical approaches to the work of the scholar to be honored are consequently avoided (Wardenga 1995: 5). The DF has become common after World War I. In this period, festschriften are often used as an instrument in scientific politics. Characteristic for the DFC in the fifties and sixties is the subtle depersonalization which goes hand in hand with a significant quantitative increase (the Mehrfachfestschrift – several festschriften for the same scholar for various birthdays – becomes more common). The thematic range of the articles in a festschrift becomes broader and begins to say more about the contributing authors than the scholar to be honored. Wardenga sketches a diachronic development: in D we find a subordination of the authors under the supposed principles of a school, in DF, the work of the scholar to be honored represents the basis which the articles draw from. Finally, in DFC we encounter a complete individuality of the contributions with a high degree of heterogeneity which, in turn, makes it increasingly difficult to see distinctive properties of particular festschriften.

There is no solid evidence of the extent to which similar developments can be observed beyond geographers’ festschriften, but it is not unlikely that Wardenga’s typology is also valid in many other fields. In linguistics, some authors still seem to have in mind the DF model, but eventually tend to perform according to the DFC model. One contributor of the present volume first asked us for a list of publications of the scholar to be honored. In the paper submitted by him, however, he did not refer to the honoree. In the present volume 50% of the contributions do not contain a reference to the scholar to be honored. A review of a festschrift written by somebody who has also received a festschrift starts with the following words (translated by the authors): “Festschriften […] very often suffer from the heterogeneity of the contributions, because the personal relations to the honorees (and to one of their very often manyfold interests in research) seem more important than the thematic coherence of the volume.”

However, at least in the field of linguistics, it seems that Wardenga’s typology is not fully sufficient to account for contemporary festschriften. The new trend – the current volume exemplifies this – is to turn festschriften entirely into thematically defined collections of articles which are distinguished from ordinary collections of articles solely by the range of authors included and by their publication on the occasion of a certain birthday. In the clash of the older DFC model and the actual requirements for higher thematic and formal coherence proclaimed by the publisher, the publisher is normally the winning party. This entails that the contributors of a festschrift cannot any longer be the set of closest friends of the person to be honored.
If festschrifts become increasingly indistinguishable from ordinary collections of articles, the question arises as to whether they differ in quality. This seems to be a major concern for some publishing houses and series’ editors, who are increasingly reluctant to accept festschrifts. The fact that festschrifts are treated unfavorably is also observable in the following remark of an editor: “The publisher explicitly wanted us to avoid the term ‘festschrift’.” This negative attitude on the part of publishers diverges from the emic perspective of festschrift editors. When asked “Do you think an average festschrift (not the one edited by yourself) has the same academic quality as any other average collection of articles?” 48% answered ‘rather yes’ and 39% ‘rather no’ (6.5% both for ‘certainly no’ and ‘certainly yes’). In this respect, a mocking evaluation of the quality of papers in festschrifts in Zillig’s novel is thought-provoking:

Generally, it must be said that the kind and number of mistakes and oddities that appeared in the contributions implied that a large number of authors were confident that their sloppy manuscripts would turn into theological papers adhering to a certain scientific standard under the control of the editors. There were innumerable violations against all principles of scientific composition such as they are considered imperative, as a matter of course of undergraduate students’ term papers. (Zillig 2004: 36; translated by the authors)

Regardless of the question about the general quality of papers, the editors are aware of the publisher’s resentment. In answer to the question “Do you think it has become more difficult to publish a festschrift nowadays as opposed to earlier?” 22% marked ‘certainly’ and another 52% ‘rather yes’, whereas only very few editors think that is has rather not (19%) or certainly not (7%) become more difficult to publish a festschrift.

3. What is a ritual?

The term ritual is used in quite different ways in distinct research traditions. According to Goffman (1967: 57), the “ritual represents a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts while in the immediate presence of an object that has a special value for him.” Goffman’s approach is inspired by French religious sociology (Durkheim), but he applies the notion of ritual to modern secular living, where the individual “stubbornly remains as a deity of considerable importance” (Goffman 1967: 95). Adopting Goffman’s extensive approach, Werlen (1984) discusses the notions of ritual in such different fields as cultural anthropology, sociology and social psychology in a comprehensive
manner, which leads to a formulation of his own definition of rituals as institutionalized expressive acts. The notion is applied empirically in two highly distinct domains: the Roman mass and the beginnings and endings of everyday conversations. The aim of Werlen’s approach is to be inclusive, “to describe a large set of acts that are structurally similar, but otherwise quite different” (Werlen 1984: 89; translated by the authors).

While adopting Werlen’s definition, Antos (1987: 12) criticizes Werlen’s approach for being too inclusive. According to Antos, the expressive aspect of rituals is characterized by a set of indicators such as the suspension of the sincerity condition, lack of informativity and formulaity. Antos’ material are opening words (Grussworte) in festschrifts by which he does not mean the academic festschrifts discussed in this paper, but commemoration of anniversaries, jubilees or other important events where politicians and other public figures address the participants, praise the event and thank those responsible for its organisation. In our view, Antos’ approach, while well-suited for the material he treats, is too narrow for a general discussion of rituals. For our purposes, for instance, it would be highly problematic to apply the suspension-of-sincerity-condition to academic festschrifts. We have some difficulties imagining that a team of editors can edit a festschrift without having the intention of sincerely wanting to honor a scholar.

While being quite inclusive, Werlen (1984: 72) excludes the ethological notion of ritualization in biology coined implicitly by Tinbergen (1952) and explicitly by Huxley (1966). Hereby, he differs from Haiman (1994: 5), who claims that ritualization both in ethology and anthropology describes “the very general process whereby phylogenetically instrumental actions are emancipated from their primary motivation and free to serve a communicative function instead”. In our view, Haiman’s approach is primarily ethological: he shows convincingly that the ethological notion of ritualization can be applied with great profit to the diachronic study of language. Effects of ritualization in language, according to Haiman, are grammaticalization and double articulation (the smallest meaningful signs are made up of still smaller units which are themselves meaningless).

In this sense, Haiman understands ritualization as the acquisition of meaning: ritualization is the creation of language (such as the stylized searching behavior of bees at food sites which then evolves into bee language). The instrumentalization entails a codification with a fixity of form. He conflates, though, the opposition of ritualization and imitation that other researchers make in search of the human predisposition for acquiring language and other symbolic behavior (Tomasello and Camaioni 1997). Whereas, in their reasoning, ritualization is “basically a kind of social
‘shaping’ process in which each participant learns the effects of his or her behavior on the other’s behavior, sometimes in a complex sequential pattern” (Tomasello and Camaioni 1997: 12), imitative learning involves bidirectionality and therefore also an understanding of the intentions of others.

However, Werlen (1984: 72) is certainly right in warning of an application of the ethological notion of ritualization for the description of culturally determined human rituals. He points out that stylized kisses in rituals would be ritualized ritualizations in an ethological perspective, since kisses are explained as dysfunctional breeding behavior by ethiologists. However, knowing why human beings started to kiss is of little interest for understanding kisses in rituals.

In the socially and culturally determined view, some behavior may be considered a ritual if “it follows patterned routines; it is a system of signs that convey other than overt messages; it is sanctioned by strong expressions of moral approval; and it has adaptive value in facilitating social relations” (Firth 1972: 29–30). In the introduction to a recently edited volume, Senft and Basso (2009: 2–3) define ritual communication as “artful, performed semiosis, predominantly but not only involving speech, that is formulaic and repetitive and therefore anticipated within particular contexts of social interaction” and assemble publications on a wide range of “ritual events as sites of challenge to traditions and to existing power relations”.

Bearing all these considerations on festschrifths and rituals in mind, it seems promising to consider the making of a festschrift according to Werlen’s domains “action”, “expressivity” and “institutionalization”.

4. Ritual aspects in the making of a festschrift

4.1. Action

Ritual in Goffman’s sense implies deliberate action. Accordingly, Werlen (1984) views the kind of action involved in rituals as generally volitional. However, “[t]he predefinition of voluntariness does not mean that the performer in a ritual acts fully consciously or unforcedly” (Werlen 1984: 81; translated by the authors).

The person taking part in a ritual becomes involved with the specific realm and reality of the ritual; often, her obligation is not to be convinced of something, but to perform the right action at the right time. However, it may be the case that the performer in the ritual is not aware of the sense of his or her action or does not want to know its sense. Nevertheless, rituals are not
omitted, sometimes due to sensations of fear from deities or similar reasons. (Werlen 1984: 62; translated by the authors)

Deliberate choice and specific expectations of the environment do not exclude one another. However, not every person is completely free to decide that s/he wants to edit a festschrift, unless s/he wants to conflict with the “doctrine of the Infelicities” of festschriften, “the things that can be and go wrong” (Austin 1962: 14). Therefore, there must be a certain scholar who can be honored with a festschrift and this person must be in a very specific period of his or her life. Furthermore, there must be the intention of honoring this person and there must be the knowledge or the presupposition that this person will feel pleased and honored by a festschrift.

The very presence of such conditions can be reason enough for certain individuals to feel pressured. But is there, in the community, some generally received opinion as to who is responsible for compiling a festschrift? To explore this question, our questionnaire contained the item: “Who – in your opinion – is obliged to edit a festschrift for X?” One respondent hastened to point out that “to be obliged’ is too strong!”, hereby emphasizing the moment of deliberate choice. A point in favor of our formulation of the question is that Goffman (1967: 50) speaks of obligation as well: “an obligation which is felt as something that ought to be done may strike the obligated person either as desired thing or as an onerous one, in short, as pleasant or unpleasant duty.” Koch et al. (1997: 10–11) take for granted that the editing of a traditional festschrift cannot be fun: “By the way, we do not want to conceal that making the festschrift was not only hard work, but that we also had a lot of fun editing this booklet. This would certainly have been different with a real festschrift.” These considerations might suggest that only the explicit early rejection of a festschrift by a scientist could disambiguate the situation and eliminate the duty for action to be taken by those feeling responsible. The answers to our questionnaires suggest that this attitude is mistaken. When asked “Do you envy colleagues whose elder colleagues explicitly stated that they would never like to get a festschrift?” 63.3% answered ‘certainly not’, 33.3% ‘rather no’, and only 3.3% ‘rather yes’. One respondent wrote “It is fun making a festschrift but people should not feel pushed [...] better no festschrift than a forced one”. However, the question arises as to the conditions you feel pushed by or whether or not you can choose to be pushed. The results (Figure 3) suggest that there is a high amount of indeterminacy as to who is considered responsible. The large amount of “gray answers” (rather yes, rather no) point at a diffuse perception of obligation.
This can lead to situations where several teams of editors independently start feeling responsible for initiating the process. This is nicely described in Zillig (2004: 19).

It seems that in the emic perspective of festschrift editors, the opinion prevails that the decision to edit a festschrift is a deliberate one. To our question “Did you feel pressured by your environment to edit a festschrift for X?” 45% answered ‘certainly not’, 26% ‘rather no’, 23% ‘rather yes’ and 6% ‘certainly yes’. This could be expanded by an etic approach where the probability of festschrifts given typical felicity conditions (65th birthday of professors) is modeled statistically. If people were able to choose completely freely, festschrifts viewed as statistical events would have to be distributed completely at random. Without having carried out any further investigations it seems obvious to us, however, that festschrifts are not randomly distributed over 60 or 65-year-old professors. If there is no random distribution, what are the relevant factors? As already pointed out by Wardenga (1995: 4), there is no obvious correlation between the importance and impact of a scholar and the probability that s/he will be honored with a festschrift. Yet it is apparent that festschrifts occur in hotbeds and as outliers (these terms are borrowed from areal typology, see Nichols 1992: 131). In certain populations festschrifts are endemic. For instance, if you are a professor in Slavic studies in Germany, it is much more likely that you will be honored by a festschrift than if you are an average linguistic typologist. An important factor seems to be the local network. If your elder colleague at your department receives a festschrift, this seems to function as a booster to raise the awareness about festschrifts and can drastically increase your chance to receive one yourself. Unfortunately, there are no epidemiological investigations of festschrifts, as far as we know.

Scientists are highly responsible-minded people. They are well aware that certain things have to be done whatever the costs and whoever does it. Hence an important question is the editor’s belief whether her or his action
was absolutely necessary for the successful editing of a festschrift. Interestingly, the answers to the question “Do you think there would have been a festschrift for X if you had not helped edit one?” are rather equally distributed (19% ‘certainly yes’, 23% ‘rather yes’, 32% ‘rather no’, 26% ‘certainly no’).

A further concern is whether or not the editors benefit in some way from the work effort on their behalf. We therefore asked: “What effect does/did the festschrift have for your academic career?” For 37% it was ‘rather positive’ and it was not perceived as negative by anybody, but for the majority it made no difference (63%). 13% answered that the editorial work ‘certainly’ helped to enlarge their academic network, 39% ‘rather yes’, 42% ‘rather no’ and 7% ‘certainly not’. The large proportion of editors who did not profit from editing a festschrift in their self-reporting shows that self-interest cannot be the dominant motivation to edit a festschrift. On the other hand, it is important to note that it is a game where you do not run a risk of losing much. A danger seems to be, however, sporadic risks of severe personal conflicts with potential contributors “because they did not like the concept of the festschrift” (mentioned four times with one person) and especially “because you had not asked them to contribute to the festschrift” (mentioned six times with one person and once with two persons).

4.2. Expressivity

A ritual is expressive in the sense that the performed action A stands for a certain ‘content’ B (Werlen 1984: 83). As far as festschriften are concerned, the question arises as to what the collection itself represents or, put differently, what festschrift editors want to express when making a festschrift. In the questionnaire we asked “Why did you edit a festschrift for X?” and suggested the following possible motivations: (a) to thank X that he/she helped you with your academic career, (b) to show that you belong to the school initiated by X, (c) because X had always been very fair to you, (d) to express that you think that X is a distinguished scientist, (e) because it would be a shame for X not to get a festschrift, (f) because it would be a shame for you if you had not been able to edit a festschrift, (g) to show your environment that you are among the closest friends of X, (h) because you thought X would be very happy to get a festschrift. Other reasons could be filled in manually.
Figure 4. Why did you edit a festschrift for X? (n=31)

Figure 4 shows that the motivations are highly diverse. They can be said to be both scientific and non-scientific at the same time. For most editors, making a festschrift is first and foremost an expression of distinct acknowledgement for the honored person’s scientific merits. However, making a festschrift is also making a gift in a plain, non-metaphorical way. It is viewed as a recompensation, as an “antidosis”. This is also in line with some of the editors’ comments like “I thought it would be a gesture of personal friendship as well as a professional one,” or “X is a good friend, and would be pleased to receive a Festschrift”. This is well in line with Goffman’s (1971: 63) notion of positive rituals that “affirm and support the social relationship between doer and recipient” similar to the utang na loob relationship in Philippine culture (Dolan 1991: 89).

As expected, the commitment to a school is no longer as dominant as it used to be for festschriften in earlier times, neither is plain friendship a dominant motivation. Furthermore, an act need not necessarily be a symbol by itself. It is also possible that an action is taken only because the absence of that action could be interpreted in a particular way which must be avoided. The question thus arises as to whether somebody loses face if there is no festschrift, given that the felicity conditions for making a festschrift are met. If this is the case, the question then becomes “who loses face?”: the person who is not honored or the person who was expected to produce a festschrift but did not do so. According to the perception of festschrift editors, the opinion prevails that there is a much higher danger that the person to be honored loses face. This is remarkable since this assumption presupposes a model where scientists are not directly in control of their reputation by their actions alone. One editor mentioned “it was important to raise the status of the subject within the university” as a major reason for making a
A successful scientist is expected to bring up disciples who still respect her/him if s/he advances in age. Yet this attitude is not compatible with the view expressed in the ceremonial profanation example provided in the Introduction, which suggested that editing a festschrift is a bold attempt by impertinent greenhorns to see themselves as a distinguished teacher’s equals.

Most of these reasons are not overtly stated in the final product and can only be inferred from common knowledge of the editor(s) and the honoree, as well as the conventional meaning of a festschrift. Reformulating a passage from Searle (1969: 60–61), this would mean that the editor “intends to produce a certain illocutionary effect” (i.e. celebrate, thank, please, etc. the honoree) by means of getting the honoree “to recognize his intention to produce that effect, and he also intends this recognition to be achieved in virtue of the fact that the meaning of the item he utters” (i.e. the festschrift he produces) “conventionally associates it with producing that effect”.

Only 16% of the honorees in our sample ever mentioned to somebody that s/he would like to have a festschrift before the festschrift was planned. And only 26% of the editors asked a relative of the honoree to find out whether s/he would be glad to receive one. Therefore, we have to assume that most of the festschrifts are tackled only with the general assumption that the honoree will be pleased. This only gives a very general impression – regarding the costs it takes for the donor(s) – about the general meaningfulness of this gift and its anticipated positive acceptance.

The symbolic nature of festschrifts bears yet another dimension. The issue is not only what the editors want to express, but also the extent to which the crafting of a festschrift as a ritual symbolizes a major change in the environment where it is performed. We know from frame semantics (Fillmore 1985) that concepts are difficult to detach from the frame they evoke, which encompasses the cultural context in which concepts are applied. In a way, a festschrift ritually re-enacts the loss of power of a scholar when retiring at the age of about 65 years. Especially in Central Europe, where festschriften are most vital, professors forfeit most of their power to influence the career of younger scholars when retiring. They gradually have to stop applying for research projects and supervising PhD students and they do not teach any longer. And most importantly, they have to vacate the chair they were holding which bears major consequences for many other people affiliated with that chair. The festschrift is thus a ritual celebration which confirms that the spirit of a scholar has been passed to others, who still hold power somewhere else and hence, the original power will not
be lost. In a society where scholars would not retire, festschrifts would not make much sense.

Another important aspect of expressivity in festschrifts pertains to indirect communication. It is a characteristic of many festschrift contributions to contain hidden allusions. Zillig (2004: 37) gives a marvellous example: a contributor in a theological festschrift begins his article with an example from a women’s magazine to allude ironically to the merits of the honoree in establishing a center for feministic theology and the theology of minorities. For obvious reasons, we cannot refer here to the hidden allusions in the present contribution and elsewhere in this volume.

4.3. Institutionalization

There needs to be a certain amount of social agreement that a collection of writings, i.e. a festschrift, is a recognizable way of honoring and celebrating a person in order to make a festschrift a felicitous gift, both for the donor and the presentee. “Ritual behavior requires cooperation with one’s peers in treating something as a natural fact when it is merely a social fact; it requires acquiescence to social conventions and thus constrains interactants’ freedom to act” (Basso and Senft 2009: 10). We therefore want to consider how academia provides the contexts for the meaning and the making of festschrifts so that the procedures seem to become formalized enough to be perpetuated from one generation of scientists to the next.

Ritual is associated with repeated action. According to Mead (1973: 90), “it is of the essence of ritual that those who participate in it have participated before.” However, most festschrift editors have edited only a single festschrift (77.5% in our sample, 13% twice, 6.5% three times, 3% more than three times). Haiman (1994) and Leach (1966) argue that one may be a novice in ritual performance. But, “the stability of the form of the ritual through time is dependent on the fact that it is familiar to most of the actors” (Leach 1966: 407) or in other words, “it is essential that those who participate are following a model that has been established (perhaps by others) who have participated before” (Haiman 1994: 23, parentheses as in original).

But how does a festschrift editor learn to repeat or to perform in a more general sense? 100% of the informants in our sample indicated that they did not use a manual for festschrifts or any written instructions, where it is described how to edit a festschrift. (There aren’t any such manuals, as far as we know.) Rather all festschrift editors seem to be autodidacts. Some of them seem to know how to edit a festschrift due to former experience with
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editing collections of articles. In 57% of the situations, one of the editors knew how to edit a collection of articles due to previous experience. In 36% (partly overlapping) the editors had consulted a colleague, who had already edited a festschrift. This suggests that festschriften are far from being a ritual that is established by automated repetition. Most performers of the action are not yet proficient in performing it when they start the process. They do it for the first time and have never been taught how to do so properly. The action itself is reinvented rather than repeated and each festschrift seems to possibly influence the production of any following volume.

According to Leach (1966: 405), “the performance of ritual serves to perpetuate knowledge which is essential for the survival of the performer”. It is probably a very specific feature of the festschrift that its production is rather opaque and in most cases, only the product will serve as a basis for future performances.

Aquiring the concept of a festschrift seems to be part of an incremental process of becoming more familiar with academic institutional facts. This is underlined by the results of a survey where 51 people from the University of British Columbia Department of Linguistics (34 undergraduate and 7 graduate students, 6 PhD students and 4 professors) were asked to provide a definition of a festschrift. None of the undergraduate students had an idea of – but some had very creative approaches to – what a festschrift is. Furthermore, it seems as if graduate students usually do not know what a festschrift is either, as only one out of seven was able to give a definition. PhD students are more likely to provide a definition, as only two from six informants failed. Finally, all the members of the faculty could easily and spontaneously describe what a festschrift is. Therefore, the longer the integration within the academic community, the greater the acquaintance with its customs and the greater the awareness of what a festschrift is. This is a clear hint at the institutional character of festschriften, as “they require human institutions for their existence” (Searle 1995: 2).

However, the fact that more than two thirds of the editors stated that they ‘completely’ (29%) or ‘rather’ (41%) edited the festschrift in their free time lets us doubt whether festschriften can be termed institutionalized in academia. We are not aware of any cases where somebody received particular funding or a sabbatical for editing a festschrift.
5. Matters of manner

In the cases of rituals, it is not only that by performing a certain act (making a festschrift) we attempt to do something (honor or celebrate the honoree), but a major focus is also placed on the way something is done.

In ritual communication, of both the formal and everyday varieties, the manner of action is not merely instrumental in achieving public recognizability of the action’s meaning. It is also itself made available for evaluation as a token of the actor’s acquiescence to a constraint of social convention. (Enfield 2009: 57)

With respect to the manner of making a festschrift, we will consider discretion and turn-taking in more detail.

5.1. Discretion

It is a common feature of gifts that they are designated to be a surprise for the donee. The same is true for festschrifths in most cases, as only 13% (four) of our informants declared that the festschrift they edited was no secret to the honoree from the very beginning. In their attempt to keep the festschrift a secret, editors elaborate strategies to conceal the whole process to the prospective honoree like using code words (44% of the editors), meeting in the dark (26%), telling the contributors not to reveal anything or not to spread the information, etc. Unfortunately, in only 56% of the cases, the surprise effect is accomplished, as there might be a colleague or some other person in the honoree’s environment who mentions the festschrift to the honoree before the handover. In some of our colleagues’ experiences, contributors acted inattentively, put the reference on the website, on their publication record or cited it in manuscripts. One editor responded to our question “Did you discover (e.g., on the Internet) a reference to a paper from your volume with the explicit indication ´A Festschrift for X´ before the festschrift was handed over?” with complete lack of understanding for such behavior “That would not have been in accordance with the aim of achieving a surprise.” Unfortunately, however, such incredible things happen recurrently and eventually corrupt the laborious efforts of the editors to preserve discretion.12

In this context, it is also interesting to point out that 46% of the editors in our sample did not congratulate the honoree on the occasion of his or her 64th (in some cases 59th) birthday. Regarding the fact that they are actually working towards the donation of a book on exactly that date, we can take for granted that everybody is quite aware of this date. Obviously, festschrift
editors tend to avoid giving the honoree the idea that they think of that date all the time.

Finally, we would like to note that the business of hide-and-seek is not in any way unique to festschriften in academia. In peer-review and appointment committees, discretion is often a felicity condition for the validity of decisions taken and the institutionalization of discretion allows the actors to act effectively without threatening their own face or the face of others.

5.2. Turn-taking

In this section we will turn to a micro-analysis of interactions that are constitutive parts of the macro-process of making a festschrift. Given that a festschrift is a collection of papers that are brought together to honor someone, there are several competing interests that have to be taken into consideration. Who is invited to participate and according to what criteria are contributors selected? How can the topic be chosen to maximize the number of people that the editors think the honoree would be pleased to see as authors in his/her festschrift, without minimizing the chance of presenting a coherent (which means sellable for the publisher) volume?

According to our editors, issues concerning these questions can be perceived both as the greatest freedom or the greatest restriction in the context of making a festschrift. While many editors mention that the selection of the topic, the contributors, and the publisher was one of the most significant freedoms during the creation of the festschrift, there are editors who remember otherwise: “the restricted topic – therefore, not all former students and collaborators could contribute”, “names you cannot omit, though you hope they will not want to contribute”, “to accept even bad papers after having asked for them”, “difficulty of who to invite and not to invite”.

The decision of who to include as a contributor, which is also a major topic in Zillig (2004), is a potential source of conflicts in the making of a festschrift. In our questionnaire 7 of 31 respondents reported personal conflicts with persons who had not been included as authors. One respondent reported that the resonance was so unexpectedly high that the generally very good and innovative contributions had to be distributed on three entirely different volumes, which, in return, caused an unexpected increase of editorial work.

Finally, there seems to be a very clear understanding of the handing over of a festschrift. To the question “Does a festschrift have to be donated to X on a public occasion with many people present?” the vast majority answers ‘certainly yes’ (42%) or ‘rather yes’ (51%).
6. Conclusions

Whether festschriffs are rituals depends on the definition of ritual one follows. It should have become clear that rituals need not necessarily be empty: in social psychology, rituals are at the very basis of human nature, from the point of view of ethiology and grammaticalization, it is very likely that human language originates and evolves through ritualization, and in the development of infants, rituals, together with imitation, are fundamentals of the origin of human behavior. One thing that is common to rituals in almost all of their manifestations is that they need to be performed by somebody, usually in interaction with others, hence in social interaction. As Werlen (1984: 62) states, you need not to be fully convinced of a ritual for performing it. However, you have to act it out with your person. This certainly holds true for festschriffs.

However, the discussion in Section 4 has shown that festschriffs can be considered institutionalized only in some respects and that the component of expressivity is particularly difficult to assess since what is expressed and who expresses it often remains highly opaque considering that hidden allusions can noticeably blur the picture. Yet it is clearly evident that the factors action, expressivity, institutionalization, and manner are central for an understanding of the phenomenon festschrift.

The only unifying property of all festschriffs seems to be the editors’ attempted illocution of honoring and celebrating a much-respected academic. Probably, it is the variable nature of the festschrift (see Section 2 above) that constitutes its main strength (comparable to influenza viruses) and may be one of the reasons why this particular genre exhibits a surprising continuity. Thus, the adaptivity of the phenomenon festschrift across time in a changing academic environment need not necessarily be interpreted as a weakness as suggested in Wirth (1995) and Wardenga and Wirth (1995).

A particular feature of the ritual of making a festschrift is that most of the knowledge about performing the ritual has to be inferred from given products of such rituals. The making itself is a highly opaque process. Only the violation of the conventions about the manner of performing it, e.g. the violation of the discretion, can lead to sanctions against the persons involved in performing the ritual.13

Festschriffs appeal to the social competence of actors in academia. In many areas of academic life, the only thing that counts is scientific excellence. Social intelligence is no asset for journal publications and for many universities social skills are no criteria when hiring new staff. A festschrift, however, cannot be organized by solitary loners. As the interactions con-
cerning festschrifts seem to have a component of Malinowski’s (1923) phatic communion (see also Senft 2009: 82), they are training units for cultivating interaction in an environment where interaction would be crucial for the prosperity of the community, even though it is generally not demanded from individuals. Since the interaction of actors in academia is of crucial importance also for teaching, it is very likely that students can actually profit from the making of festschrifts indirectly, although most of them do not even know what a festschrift is.

Even though the making of a festschrift can be considered as performing a ritual to some extent, each edition of a festschrift reinvents the procedure and adds new constituent parts to the common knowledge to be perpetuated. This is nicely expressed in a poem by the Bernese troubadour Mani Matter (2011), with which we conclude this paper:  

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{tradition} & \quad \text{tradition} \\
\text{was unsere väter schufen} & \quad \text{what our fathers created} \\
\text{war} & \quad \text{was} \\
\text{da sie es schufen} & \quad \text{when they created it} \\
\text{neu} & \quad \text{new} \\
\text{bleiben wir später} & \quad \text{to remain later} \\
\text{den vätern} & \quad \text{to the fathers} \\
\text{treu} & \quad \text{true} \\
\text{schaffen wir neu} & \quad \text{let us create anew}
\end{align*}
\]

Notes

1. This paper has been written in our free time. We apologize to our families. We are grateful to Adrian Leemann and to three anonymous reviewers for many valuable comments and suggestions for reformulation. Thanks to all our anonymous informants. Finally, we cannot conceal that we would have missed some of the sources without the German Wikipedia article “Festschrift” (http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Festschrift&oldid=85480713, date of access 10.4.2011).

2. An anonymous reviewer criticizes that we do not consider the prefaces and introductions in festschrifts along with the references to the honorees in festschrift articles. The reviewer argues that “the making of” in the title of our paper is mistaken because the work itself and the event of handing it over are integral parts of the ritual. We do not claim in any way that the underinvestigated topic of the ritual character of festschrifts is explored in any exhaustive way in this paper. However, we aim at emphasizing in particular the activity and back-
stage component of the ritual. This is exactly why the most obvious data source – the available products themselves – were not considered an ideal starting point and why we did not undertake any discourse studies of what festschrift editors write explicitly in festschriften. By the same token we excluded an investigation of the reactions of the honorees which is not part of the “making”.

3. This is well in line with the comment by an anonymous reviewer that this paper could not be printed as a serious contribution in a linguistic journal.

4. According to Hawkins (1978), ‘associative anaphora’ are undoubtedly the most frequent use of the definite article the: “It appears that the mention of one NP, e.g. a wedding, can conjure up a whole set of associations for the hearer which permit the bride, the bridesmaids, etc.” (Hawkins 1978: 123).

5. Publishing houses have an ambivalent relationship towards festschriften. Our publisher did not want the word “festschrift” to appear in a subtitle to the volume because this had “turned out to be very mischievous in the past”. It was not possible to receive any additional information what this meant in more concrete terms. However, there was no problem to make it clear with a dedication that the volume is a festschrift. Although terms such as “festschrift” and “papers in honor of” tend to disappear from titles at least as far as high prestige publishers are concerned, it is still obvious for virtually all parties if a book is a festschrift. Some library catalogues note if a book is a festschrift even if this is not made explicit in a subtitle. Libraries are an important target group for publishers, hence, obviously omitting the term “festschrift” in titles cannot have the goal of deluding libraries. The major problem seems to be that there is no simple word for “a festschrift which is at the same time a thematically coherent peer-reviewed volume”. We guess that this is exactly what is meant if a festschrift does not contain that word in its subtitle.

6. This type of festschrift is defined as the “festschrift that terminates the employment on occasion of the retirement (dienstbeschliessende Emeritierungs-festschrift)” (Zillig 2004: 22).

7. Such a dyadic bond, typical of the traditional personal alliance system in the Philippines, can be based on different reasons: someone saved another person’s life, provided employment or made it possible for someone to become educated. All these different gifts “initiate a long-term reciprocal interdependency in which the grantor of the favor can expect help from the debtor whenever the need arises” (Dolan 1991: 89). Utang la loob relations can last for generations and all favors from the debtor can only be considered attempts to repayment.

8. In most cases these expectations are met, but there are no guarantees. In one of 29 answers X complained to an editor directly and in one of 28 answers indirectly. A reason for complaint was that “people who – in X’s opinion – would have been important, had not been asked to contribute”.

9. This is also in line with the comments of our informants. They stated that they knew how to edit a festschrift “because I had read lots of festschriften before” or “I studied a number of festschriften to find inspiration” etc.
10. We are extremely sorry that we can only provide a few examples: “A fest-
schrift is a message received through fest waves, similar to tv and x-ray waves,
but at a much higher frequency. Fest waves have the power to communicate
thought, emotion and winning lottery ticket numbers.” or “I would imagine this
word to mean a scaled water dragon that cannot close its mouth fully because
this is the sound it makes while splashing though the water.” or “It is clearly
evident that a Festschrift is a type of written script that appears when a non
germanophone attempts to understand the semantic referent of a word by split-
ting its component parts into a part the subject thinks he knows, and the part of
which he has no idea. So perhaps it’s about building a new discourse.” or
“Some kind of schism perhaps?” or “I’m not sure, but as a German minor, I
would guess that it has something to do with accurate or correct writing.”

11. It is beyond the scope of this paper to clarify the notion of “free time” in aca-
demia.

12. In the case of the festschrift at hand, the secret was revealed to the honoree
prematurely on two occasions. The honoree discovered the reference of a
forthcoming article on a website of one of the contributors (even though the ed-
tors had explicitly asked them not to do so before the handing over and even
though the editors had regularly googled for the reference). Additionally, one
contributor (from the same department as the honoree!) had forgotten a copy of
the article in the printer which the honoree then unfortunately found.

13. It is not clear, and we have not inves-
tigated, what kind of sanctions might be
expected in the case of failure of a festschrift. However, a diffuse fear of sanc-
tions obviously plays some role in the editing process.

14. On a related note, in our questionnaire convenience sample 86% of the persons
to be honored were male.

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