

The Function of the Introduction in Competitive Oral Interpretation

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Practices and styles have changed over the years in the field of oral interpretation to reflect current theories, but there has remained a consistent belief that the value of interpretation lies in its ability to communicate—to share meaning and insight.¹ This philosophy of interpretation places emphasis upon the literature itself rather than the performance. But this emphasis is not always what occurs in competitive forensics. Oral interpretation events often can be characterized by a stylized, technique-oriented approach that forces attention to the performance and away from the literature. Given these assumptions, oral interpretation competitors should be guided toward making performance choices that reflect techniques derived from the meaning and substance of the literature.

One of the performance choices confronting an oral interpreter is reflected in the question, "What is the function of the introduction?" Implicit within this question are a variety of philosophical underpinnings that demonstrate the complex nature of response. Consequently, this paper will 1) present some representative views on the functions of the introduction in oral interpretation, 2) discuss current styles of introductions used in competitive forensics and concerns stemming from these styles, and 3) offer a rationale and suggestions for re-directing the focus of competitive oral interpretation to the literature itself.

Functions of the Introduction

Regardless of the type of public communication, introductions generally serve some common purposes. Typically these purposes include getting attention, setting the mood, providing pertinent information, relating the material to the audience, and previewing the content that will follow.

An examination of oral interpretation texts reveals fairly consistent approaches to the introduction of literature in performance settings. Judy Yordon, for example, notes that the introduction serves three preparatory purposes:

- (1) it prepares the audience for the specific selection you are performing,

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- (2) it prepares you to perform for the audience, and
- (3) it lets the audience see you as you are before you change to become the speaker in the text.²

Otis Aggertt and Elbert Bowen claim that the introduction "should reveal your relationship with the material you read, but may also deal with the author and his creation of the selection."³ They further explain that the introduction should include any information necessary for audience understanding and appreciation of the literature.⁴ An introduction, according to Wallace Bacon, "should look ahead to the reading and should set a tone that will prepare for it."⁵ Charlotte Lee's concept of an introduction "gives you a chance to size up your audience. . . . helps you organize your thoughts. . . . helps you arrive at the mood you need for what you are going to do."⁶ Finally, Beverly Whitaker Long and Mary Frances HopKins suggest that the interpreter should, "Develop an introduction that *sets up* the literary text."⁷

Based upon these principles, it seems clear that an introduction serves informational and rhetorical functions, in addition to the obvious aesthetic roles it plays. Both of these principal functions lead to the development of certain components in the format of the introduction.

Format of the Introduction

A preliminary, albeit cursory, audience analysis should establish exactly what the audience needs to know about the selection and author in order to make the sharing of literature a meaningful experience for all involved. Aggertt and Bowen pose the following question to guide the interpreter in fulfilling the informational function: "What needs to be said about the author, the literary form, any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities, or other significant matters to help your audience understand it?"⁸

In addition to the identification of the title and author, certain background information such as scene description, previous action, biographical data, and critical commentary,⁹ may provide a clearer understanding of the literature and allows the audience to have a solid grasp of the who, what, when, where, and why of the literature. Thus, the informational function serves to increase audience comprehension and appreciation by isolating important and selective details.

Long and HopKins indicate the rhetorical or critical aspect of introductions by advising interpreters to discuss the appeal of the literature, "its relation to the audience, its genesis with the author."¹⁰ This focus creates a direct relationship between the performer, the literature, and the audience. By identifying the signifi-

cance and appeal of the literature, the interpreter is able to translate analytical observations into performance choices. This process, according to Jay VerLinden, allows the interpreter to function in the role of a "critical thinker," advancing a "critical claim" about the literature that will be supported in the performance.¹¹ The argumentative perspective toward competitive oral interpretation would provide vital benefits to coaches, judges, and competitors. As Lewis Hershey explains, "An argumentative perspective towards forensic competition transcends practical versus aesthetic considerations in performance by inseparably linking them in the preparation, execution, and evaluation process."¹²

Styles and Concerns of Introductions

Competitive oral interpretation events are characterized by a variety of introductions, among which include the introduction that merely states title and author, the introduction that discusses *ad infinitum* every detail of the plot that time permits, the introduction that dictates how the audience should respond to the characters and themes of the literature, and the introduction that is commonly referred to as a "teaser." Each of these styles represents concerns that must be addressed if the focus of oral interpretation is to achieve not only artistic merit, but a substantive, thought-provoking influence.

First, if the introduction is to gain audience attention, set a mood, provide critical information, and establish a claim, then the statement of title and author is by no means sufficient in introducing literature. Such a performance choice not only prevents the establishment of an effective relationship between the literature, audience, and performer, but it signifies a lack of concern for the elements of understanding and appreciation in the performance of literature.

Second, at the opposite end of the spectrum is the full-blown description, which is just as detrimental to the interpretation experience. Too much information precludes the audience from feeling a sense of responsibility or actively participating in the sharing process. Consequently, what may result is a lack of attentiveness on the part of the audience who may feel estranged from the performer and the literature.

Third, motivation for audience involvement is also limited when the interpreter chooses to identify each emotion being conveyed by the characters in the literature. Although some indication of the feelings displayed in the literature may certainly be implicated in the introduction, the actual performance itself should manifest the significant emotions.

Fourth, teasers, in themselves, are fine. They may gain attention, set a mood, provide information, and set forth a claim. However, teasers, like rhetorical questions in public address, are often overworked, and the singular use of a teaser is not sufficient for three reasons: First, according to NFA guidelines, introductions used in interpretation are to be of an "original" nature. If a teaser is used as the only introduction, then this guideline cannot be fulfilled. Second, artistic merit is sacrificed if a teaser substitutes for the introduction. Instead, what often results in this instance is a technique-ridden, overdramatized, sensational approach that is certain to gain the attention of listeners. But the key issue here is whether or not that attention is derived from the literature itself, or from the emphasis on the staged performance. When used alone, teasers have a tendency to invoke mechanical and artificial performance choices. Moreover, the introduction, as VerLinden claims, "is often not distinguished from the literature."¹³ This effect often results when a teaser is used. Third, this issue is even more critical when teasers are used that fail to establish vital background information, or the significance and purpose of the literature being performed. Instead of seeing the interpreter as a communicator with a message to share, based upon his or her insight and understanding of the literature, the audience sees the interpreter as a "performer" with a presentation directed more toward effect than meaning.

Rationale and Suggestions

It is generally accepted that oral interpretation is a communicative art form. What is not generally accepted is the appropriate style of performance for competitive forensics. It is in no way suggested herein that there is but one appropriate style of performance. Yet with most art forms, there needs to be some restraint exercised—restraint usually determined by source, receiver, and situational variables. Artistic merit and aesthetic pleasure can certainly co-exist with substantive merit; they do not need to be at opposite ends of the spectrum. In fact, substantive merit serves to increase the artistic merit and aesthetic pleasure of the literature and the interpretation process.

Implicit in this discussion of the introduction is the philosophy that the performance of literature should reflect not only a literary experience, but a rhetorical experience as well. Richard Murphy characterizes the nature of a rhetorical experience when he suggests, "Any discourse, oral or written, which is directed toward getting a response from an audience on some view or action is rhetorical; he continues, "Whenever the author tries to influence

people, he is striving for a rhetorical effect."¹⁴ Audience appeal and understanding, key elements of any rhetorical experience, are fundamental to the art of oral interpretation as well. Consequently, the interpreter as artist *and* communicator should seek to advance an "interpretive" claim upon which the performance will be based, and the judge/audience can be engaged in the rhetorical experience.¹⁵ To that end, VerLinden explains, "The introduction creates the basis for the decision by both telling the judge what to listen for, and by establishing why the literature was used."¹⁶

Essentially, what is being argued in this paper is that the oral interpretation of literature is, and should be, far more than a performance; thus, the introduction to the literature should likewise be more than a performance. During the introduction, the interpreter has an invaluable opportunity not only to establish vital descriptive data, but also to engage the audience in an active, dynamic thought encounter with the literature and the claims being advanced. If this philosophy were consistently exercised in competitive interpretation events, then each interpreter and audience member would be afforded the opportunity of greater enrichment, understanding, and appreciation of literature through performance.

Three suggestions about the development of an introduction stem from this perspective of the oral interpretation of literature: First, the interpreter must provide an explanation of any information essential to the effective presentation of the literature, and to audience comprehension of that literature.

Second, a claim must be established that delineates the focus of the interpreter's analysis of the literature and justifies the literature to be presented. Third, the interpreter should approach the development of these elements creatively and thoughtfully. Appeals to our curiosity and imagination, rhetorical questions, hypothetical illustrations, literal examples, humor, etc., may function to develop the rhetorical impact and direction of the message embedded in the literature, as well as create a specific mood.

One example of an introduction utilizing these suggestions that could be used in prose interpretation is the following:

When confronted with a threat to physical harm, we generally respond quickly and directly. But what about the unseen threat—one that seeks to control the mind and the heart?

In order for a short-story author to convey this vulnerability effectively, he or she must create a situation and characters that are characterized by strong subtlety and innuendo, yet cast sufficient doubt and suspicion to alert the reader or lis-

tener to important clues that will eventually lead to a clear understanding of the events and characters involved.

Author James Clavell achieves these goals in his "chilling" tale, *The Children's Story*.

This introduction provides an attention-getter in the form of a rhetorical question, and establishes a claim that provides a directional focus for the interpretation of the literature. No particular background information is necessary, since that information will be part of the material being presented.

The following is an example of an introduction incorporating the suggestions offered herein that could be used in poetry interpretation:

What happens to a man when he discovers that all he thought he was, and had hoped to be, is nothing more than a tainted illusion conjured up in his own mind that is fogging his vision? When that fog finally lifts, is that man left with any conception of who he really is?

T.S. Eliot offers us his answer to these questions in, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

This introduction establishes an attention-getter by arousing audience curiosity and referring to emotions and experiences that are universal. The claim, although overtly established, is also handled in a subtler fashion by implying that the audience will "see" exactly what happens to a man who experiences the situations referred to in the introduction. Again, all pertinent background details will be provided within the literature.

Finally, the following example is an introduction using the suggestions that have been established which could be used in duo interpretation:

Deviant sexual behavior is not easily understood by the majority of us, yet we certainly recognize its existence. In the case of Lawrence and Joanna, we witness how their incestuous relationship has shrouded them from the outside world and precipitated the creation of illusions, particularly their imaginary children, Edna and Claypone—who insulate them against the fragile nature of their lives.

Imprisoned in a world of self-deceit, extreme vulnerability, and the confines of their apartment, Lawrence and Joanna confront the painful consequences of their existence in *Home Free* by Lanford Wilson.

This introduction immediately provides a startling attention-getter, offers important details that must be included to provide an under-

standing of the scene within the literature, and sets forth a clear claim.

Concluding Remarks

This article has argued for a renewed emphasis of the principles upon which the oral interpretation of literature is predicated. It seems crucial that each of us recognize interpretation as a communicative art that offers both literary and rhetorical influence. Based on this assumption, the interpretation of literature in performance should reflect a primary emphasis upon the meaning and value of the literature, while the performance should serve to enliven that meaning.

The introduction should establish this argumentative perspective clearly in the minds of audience members by serving informational, rhetorical, and aesthetic functions. There is much to be gained from the oral interpretation experience when the goals are substantively oriented, and the components of the performance reflect that substantive orientation. When a total communication experience is the goal of interpretation, then such concerns as why *this* literature has been chosen, why it is worth sharing, and what the interpreter hopes to accomplish by the presentation of the literature, can be established in the minds of the audience.

Endnotes

¹Judy E. Yordon, *Roles in Interpretation* (Dubuque, Iowa: W. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1982), 12.

²Yordon, 83.

³Otis J. Aggertt and Elbert R. Bowen, *Communicative Reading*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 42-43.

⁴Aggertt and Bowen, 43.

⁵Wallace A. Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 183.

⁶Charlotte Lee, *Speaking of . . . Interpretation* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman & Company, 1975), 19.

⁷Beverly Whitaker Long and Mary Frances Hopkins, *Performing Literature: An Introduction to Oral Interpretation* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982), 131.

⁸Aggertt and Bowen, 41.

⁹Yordon, 83.

¹⁰Long and Hopkins, 131.

¹¹Jay G. VerLinden, The Judge as Metacritic: A Model for Judging Interpretation Events, Unpublished paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, November 12, 1983, 5.

¹²Lewis Hershey, "Arguing Literature: Some Suggestions for the Coaching and Judging of the Performance of Literature in Individual Events Competition," *The Forensic*, No. 1 (Oct. 1987), 15. Hershey, p. 14, further argues: "For coaches, the concept of arguing literature provides a clear contextual framework for the competitive situation. Coaching becomes an increasingly strategic position of considering the internal consistency of performances as arguments for the interpretation of literature from a stated theoretical perspective. For judges, the competitive situation need not be an arena of affective evaluation. Rather, judges may reflect as to whether a particular affective response is accounted for by the competitors stated application of a chosen literary theory as it explicates a given literary text. Competitors benefit by an opportunity for increased rigor in the performance process. Specifically, performance preparation for arguing literature requires careful, in-depth analysis of the literature performed, intensive understanding of at least one school of literary criticism, and the synthesis of feeling and thought into performances that reveal human growth, not simply competitive desire."

¹³VerLinden, 7.

¹⁴Richard Murphy, "On Teaching Rhetorical Appreciation," in *Essays on Teaching Speech in the High School*, ed. J. Jeffrey Auer and Edward B. Jenkinson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 156. Also see Hellmut Geissner, "On Rhetoricity and Literarity," *Communication Education* 32 (July 1983), 275-284. Geissner's perspective establishes oral interpretation within the field of rhetoric.

¹⁵See VerLinden, 5. He argues, "The judge evaluates both the introduction and the performance to determine if (a) the literature supports the claim, (b) the performance supports the claim, and (c) the literature supports the performance."

¹⁶VerLinden, 7-8.