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Rejecting the Square Peg in a Round Hole: Expanding Arguments in Oral Interpretation Introductions

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Abstract

This paper aims to advance the level of argument made in the introductions of competitive forensic oral interpretation of literature events. It is argued that the status quo of arguments in oral interpretation introductions is overall sub-par, and perhaps limited. Connections are made between the goals of the oral interpretation introduction and current work in the scholarship of historicity. Akin to conclusions performance scholars have made, it is not the truth or falsity of literature or history which is of primary concern, but rather the (potential) generative nature of literature. Just as Pollock calls performance scholars to make history go rather than go away, I argue that as a parallel, we can make oral interpretation go rather than go away through the use of an expanded understanding of the use of an argument in the oral interpretation introduction. In lieu of an Aristotelian-only reading of argumentation in oral interpretation, we can take cues from both our performance studies and performance-based debate colleagues in order to inflate the possibilities of both meaningful and generative arguments in oral interpretation introductions. Implications for the competitive, educational, and game aspects of forensics are also offered.

Key Words: Oral Interpretation, Performance, Argumentation, Forensics, Historicity

Introduction

“Pretend you don’t see Wanda-Sue” (Bailey & Temple, 1996, p. 1). So began my NCCFI championship duo I preformed with my duo partner, Shaunté R. Caraballo, during the 2002-2003 forensic season. We were ecstatic with our season-long and national results, and I thought I knew a major reason it was so successful: it contained what I considered (perhaps because I came up with it) a brilliant argument in the intro:

Shaunté: According to multicultural relationship theorist, Dr. Francis Wardle, Critical Race Theory dictates that relationships between people and groups of people are always power relationships.
Crystal Lane: Whites have power, minorities don’t. In the following, the majority struggles throughout her life between the love of her half sister and that which society has deemed appropriate.
Shaunté: In turn, the minority is left virtually powerless.
Both: Southern Girls
Shaunté: by Sheri Bailey
Crystal Lane: and Dura Temple.
Clearly, from my early days of learning about forensics, I was convinced that the norm of an argument in the introduction of interpretation events was essential. Though along the way, I have learned not everyone agrees with the necessity of an argument, it is apparent that some clear statement of significance in interpretation introductions, though not enough to win on their own, will never competitively hurt.

So, being the comprehensive Southern California forensic competitor that I was; I was committed to adapting for a multitude of critics in every forensic genre. For interpretation events, this was my strategy: win over the individual event coaches with my literature, cutting, and performance, and win over the debate coaches with my argumentative introductions. Though I was no rock star competitor, one aspect of my interpretation ballots was consistent: my introductions rarely got critiqued for not having an argument. Perhaps I was not nearly as comprehensive as I thought. Because arguments over whether or not interpretation of literature events require argumentation in their introductions has been largely binary and somewhat unproductive, it seems time to go back to the roots of this issue: the definition of what constitutes an argument. Traditionally, when academics, especially forensicators, talk about “arguments,” we are referring to Toulmin model-oriented, syllogistic, logical argumentation like in traditional debate (and argumentation texts). However, as far back as Wallace’s (1963) good reasons and Fisher’s (1989a; 1989b) narrative paradigm, communication studies has been quite aware that the definition of argumentation has in fact expanded since the time of Plato and Aristotle.

This paper will not provide a stringent definition of what ought constitute an argument, because its primary purpose is to grant that arguments in oral interpretation events are an excellent element, but currently overly stringent in their definition. Hence, the move described in this paper for some may sound like a “lens” or a significance statement rather than an argument. These broader interpretations of arguments are precisely what this paper aims to move toward, and the aforementioned concepts are in no way logically or conceptually inconsistent with argumentation. Because forensic oral interpretation venues differ from performance art venues, in that there is logistically no possibility for discussion after performances, the interpreter has a responsibility to his or her audience to substitute that dialogue with a dialogic performance, one essential element of which is, a dynamic, performatively affirmed, and meaningful argument.

Most recently, it has become obvious that the subfield in communication with the fastest-evolving and most contextually specific definition of argumentation is that of performance studies. Instead of just applying simple, formulaic structures to different sets of content, performance studies scholars look to the embodiment of and dialogue with the particular in order to perform, observe, and discover arguments. I argue that the nature of oral interpretation begs that we do the same. Hence, I aim to encourage the advancement of the level of argument made in the introductions of competitive forensic oral interpretation of literature events. First, we will delve into the status quo of arguments in oral

interpretation introductions. Next, we will connect the goal of the oral interpretation introduction and current work in the scholarship of historicity. Finally, implications for the competitive, educational, and game aspects of forensics are also offered.

**Status Quo**

Oral interpretation of literature events are currently a staple of any comprehensive forensic program or tournament. As a staple genre of events, oral interpretation has, of course, undergone the gamut of interrogation in forensic literature, including whether these events should even be a part of forensic competition (Fouts, 1964; Williams, 1964), how the events are judged (Hershey, 1987; Lewis, Williams, Keaveney, & Leigh, 1984; Mills, 1991; Trimble, 1994, Velldien, 2002), how oral interpretation should be preformed (Aspdal, 1997; Sellnow & Sellnow, 1986; Whillock, 1984), and whether or not original or unpublished pieces of literature ought to be allowed in competition (Billings & Talbert, 2003; Endres, 1988; Lewis, 1988; Lindemann, 2002; Green, 1988). While most forensic events have been studied and studied again, oral interpretation, possibly because of its numerous and stringent norms (Cronn-Mills & Golden, 1997), remains a consistent site of contention for forensic scholars and practitioners alike. One argument remains consistent throughout literature regarding oral interp: though this genre of event has a rich history of traditional elocution behind it (Edwards, 1999), oral interpretation is dynamic and evolutionary (Rossi & Goodnow, 2006). Currently, the performance aspect of oral interpretation events seems to be the focus over the literary nature of these events. As revealed by Rossi and Goodnow (2006), “Competitive speakers are being taught that presentation is more valuable than message. Lack of regard for the text in competitive oral interpretation translates to a lack of concern for what is being communicated and/or the process of communication” (p. 54). While this shift in apparent emphasis in training oral interpretation is clearly not caused solely by the argument/no argument debate regarding introductions, the types of arguments encouraged and the level of importance associated with the argument is at least partially to blame. As further described by Rossi and Goodnow (2006):

Additionally, the de-emphasis on quality introductions and transitions in many oral interpretation events has nearly eliminated the need for the student to be a good speaker with his or her own well-organized and well-written thoughts. They need only "perform" and need not worry about crucial considerations such as clarity of personal thought and expression. The assumption is that the student's "voice" is heard through the interplay of text. How a student arranges the selections that she or he has chosen is assumed to reveal the message they want to convey. While there is an artistic validity to this rationale, such an approach still does not test the student's own cogency of thought and expression. Oral interpretation as originally developed and connected to competitive forensics was considered another unique manifestation of the public speaking process, not simply as a venue for performance. A greater emphasis on the student's own communicative

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abilities and acts deserves consideration; his or her thought and words need to be an expected and accepted part of the communication event. (p. 55)

Rossi and Goodnow’s sentiment is one that is rather traditional in many ways, but important. In the end, all of our events are public speaking and argumentation events, from their roots. Unfortunately, while trying to be progressive, some of us have gotten so far from our roots that we’ve lost sight of the original purpose of our activity. The de-emphasis on quality introductions is further supported by the fact that Kelly’s (2005) otherwise thoughtful and helpful guide to coaching interpretation events excludes a discussion of the existence of and introduction in oral interpretation events at all. Addressing norms in forensics generally, Gaer (2002) argued that “When we stifle creativity in the name of competitive success, we do create an activity where students become presentational robots and let freedom of creation and expression go by the way-side” (p. 56). Scholars tend to agree that the forensics round can and should be used as a laboratory (Aden, 1991; Dreibelbis & Gullifor, 1992; Friedley, 1992; Harris, Kropp, & Rosenthal, 1986; Jensen, 1997; Swanson, 1992a; Swanson, 1992b; Zueschner, 1992). The impact of the aforementioned two statements is this: we are in the midst of the perfect time to improve our pedagogy and students’ creativity when it comes to oral interpretation of literature. Because the foremost issue of interest to argumentation, and the only issue which all agree should be authored by the student is, in fact, the introduction, this is where I focus my efforts in this paper.

Connecting Oral Interpretation Arguments and Historicity

Akin to conclusions performance scholars have made, it is not the truth or falsity of literature or history which is of primary concern, but rather the (potential) generative nature of literature. Just as Pollock calls performance scholars to make history go rather than go away, I argue that as a parallel, we can make oral interpretation go rather than go away through the use of an expanded understanding of the use of an argument in the oral interpretation introduction. In lieu of an Aristotelian-only reading of argumentation in oral interpretation, we can take cues from both our performance studies and performance-based debate colleagues in order to inflate the possibilities of both meaningful and generative arguments in oral interpretation introductions. In the introduction to Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History, for which she is the editor, Pollock explained:

It [the argument in the book] is about the kinds of history made in performance and about history itself as a spectacular, performative rite. It constellates various approaches to the nexus of performance and history in an effort to understand how performances make history go and what happens when history seems to go away—when it seems to either fade into its representations or fall into the fragments of time. (p. 1)
I conjecture that the same performative stance can be applied directly to forensic oral interpretation of literature. The difference is that not all oral interpretation of literature pieces are pieces of history; they are not all true accounts of events. However, as performance studies scholars who specialize in historicity and memory will quickly remind us, not all “history” is a “true account of events,” either. Hence, in an effort to accomplish two goals: 1) encourage meaningful introductions in oral interpretation performances, and 2) to make the arguments we encourage in said events current, we need to look to the work that our performance studies colleagues are already doing. To at least lay the groundwork for these goals, in this analysis, I will first establish why the introduction is of value in oral interpretation events and second show how these introductions can and should connect to current work in performance studies literature, which will lay the foundation to draw implications from this line of argument.

Introductions in Oral Interpretation Need Arguments

The disagreement which transpires between coaches and sometimes competitors over whether or not interpretation introductions ought to contain arguments is interesting, because it, in and of itself, is an argument. Though the controversy abounds, embedded within interpersonal communicative transactions at tournaments, conferences, and the like, most literature specifically addressing this issue establishes that if not required, an argument in an interpretation of literature introduction is at least good (e.g. Geiger, 1952; Geiger, 1954; Geisler, 1985; Koeppell & Morman, 1991; Macksoud, 1968; McBath, 1975; Parrish, 1936; Parson, 1984; Sharpham, Matter, & Brockreide, 1971; Swarts, 1988; Valentine & Valentine, 1981; Velleux, 1969; Verlindon, 1987). While there is no written rule that explicitly requires arguments in interpretation introductions, much of the research on norms in forensics indicate that the forensic community’s unwritten expectations usually trump the written rules anyhow (e.g. Cronn-Mills & Golden, 1997; Swift, 2006; VerLinden, 1997).

As many competitors have experienced, there is usually more competitive risk to omitting than presenting an argument in an interpretation introduction. Therefore, most competitive interpretation speeches do contain at least an attempt at an argument. Argumentation skill is a major benefit of forensic participation, hence, this practice does not seem inherently dangerous. However, repetition of arbitrary or underdeveloped arguments may be a problem. After all, the forensic round is a place for experimentation and education. “Basically, to achieve the argumentative perspective in the oral interpretation events, we must begin to look at oral interpretation as a rhetorical transaction—a sender delivering a message to a receiver with the purpose of having some effect” (Koeppell & Morman, 1991, p. 143). By striving to train our students to make the best arguments possible in their interpretation introductions, we can expand the educational opportunities they have. A way in which I think we can expand and expound the quality of argumentation in oral interpretation introductions is by paralleling our performance studies colleagues.
Oral Interpretation and Historicity

Oral interpretation events utilize pieces of literature which are (usually) written by an author other than the student. These pieces of literature are sometimes factual, sometimes fictional, and most often (as characteristic of literature generally) somewhere in between. It is this factional/fictual nature which provides the most obvious connection between oral interpretation and historicity. Scholars of historicity operate from a basic assumption that history is neither complete true nor completely false. Further, the goal of historicity is to provide the most complete historical experience possible by involving a multitude of voices and modes in these particular historical accounts, which is embedded within the subfield of performance studies in communication. “Performance is often referred to as a ‘contested concept’ because as a concept, method, event, and event, it is variously envisioned and employed” (Madison & Hamera, 2006, p. xi). It is the contestation, I believe, that actually provides oral interpretation speakers an opportunity to make more meaningful arguments. By arguing with and against the particular literature which they are interpreting, the speaker’s performance goes from linear to dialogic to multi-logic. “In every instance, the epic theatre is meant for the actors as much as for the spectators” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 152). Conceptualizing oral interpretation along the Benjaminian-epic theatre lines enables the argumentation and performance which the oral interpretation speaker is engaged in to rupture meaning with the text, themselves, and the audience.

The way in which we can attempt this change is to view the argumentation in the introduction of oral interpretation pieces as both important and potentially generative. Connerton (1989) argued that societies consent to rituals by continuing to consent to performing in them. The more that we consent to the performance of meaningless or arbitrary introductions in oral interpretation performances, the further away we get from the potential of fresh perspectives in how to write and perform these arguments. “The artistic use of oral performance is also part of a slightly different genealogy, one that explicitly deploys theater in the service of community formation and community interrogation” (Jackson, 2005, p. 53). It is through the simultaneous employment of the literature, linguistic argumentation, and performative affirmation that we can create a catalyst for our community to interrogate the literature which our students choose to perform. I will not outline a formula for writing these kinds of arguments, because that would negate the entire premise which performance generally, and historicity specifically asks us to do. Essentially, this type of argumentation is a type which begs the performer to argue from and toward particulars within the literature. This does not ask the performer to lay out the plot in the introduction. This does not ask the performer to find a loosely linked quotation to present in the introduction. This does not ask the performer to make a claim that begins with something like, “We’ve all experienced . . .” The first of the “don’ts” simply does not advance anything; the second does not come from particulars in the text; and the third is virtually meaningless.
What this re-conceptualization does ask the performer to do is to perform and experience the particular piece of literature that they have chosen to perform in order to discover what the meaning, significance, or perhaps beauty of that piece is. “The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration” (Foucault, 1977, p. 148). Through performing and re-performing the literature, the oral interpretation speaker’s body becomes inscribed and re-inscribed with the text, and therefore, the speaker can articulate through their words and body the holistic experience of the literature. What this means is that the interpreter should be constantly and consistently re-visiting the introduction in order to insure that it is expressing the experience of performing and viewing the performance of the literature, so that the argumentation keeps up with the growth of the performance of the literature.

**Implications**

I do not anticipate that this position piece will immediately (or necessarily ever) revolutionize the way in which we coach and perform oral interpretation of literature events in forensic competition. In fact, I would not even advocate that this is the best approach for ever student, every coach, and every piece. Actually, that is part of the point of this particular perspective. The major issue which ought to change is the one-size-fits-all approach to arguments in oral interpretation introductions in particular, and to forensics generally. I certainly hope that the line of argumentation presented in this paper opens up discussion on this issue in the future. Based on the re-conceptualization discussed in this paper, there are three areas of implications, which center on the three primary perspectives on forensics (Bartenan, 1994; Swift, 2008). These perspectives are forensics as competition, forensics as rhetorical training, and forensics as game.

**Forensics as Competition**

The first primary perspective that coaches and students can take on for the purpose of forensics is that of forensics as competition. The competition perspective advocates competitive success as the most important outcome of forensic participation. By expanding the possibilities of types of arguments in introductions of oral interpretation events, we could be helping to level the playing field (albeit in a minute fashion) in these events. It is the restrictions that narrowly focused norms place upon students which continually hinder their creativity in forensic competition. Obviously, in order for this type of change in oral interpretation introduction argumentation to have an impact on the competitive aspect of forensics, coaches and judges would need to be open to listening to these new types of arguments and willing to award them in competition.

**Forensics as Rhetorical Training**

The second perspective that coaches and students can take on for the purpose of forensics is that of forensics as rhetorical training. This perspective puts
training for the real world as its foremost goal, and is as old as our discipline. Clearly, training students in different types of argumentation upholds the notion that forensics is concerned with education. By expanding our definition of an argument in oral interpretation introductions, we can contribute to the fulfillment of the larger rhetorical tradition which forensics speaks to. Along this vein, Bartanen and Frank (1999) argued:

In the rhetorical tradition, students are expected to face diverse audiences, knowing as well that different audiences and individual audience members require different kinds of proof. Because audiences and audience members hold different values and use a variety of modes of inquiry, students were taught the art of adaptation. Students were expected to study sociological pluralism and the various logics at work in the world. p. 43.

This performative argumentation push will speak to a different logic than our more traditional logics and arguments have spoken to in oral interpretation introductions have in the past.

Forensics as Game

The third perspective that coaches and students can take on for the purpose of forensics is that of forensics as game. This perspective advocates learning to operate within the forensic setting with the highest skill level possible for the sake of playing the game. Finally, because forensics is in many aspects a game, a refreshed view of the introduction in oral interpretation events provides another piece to play and to play with. “There are two kinds of games, finite and infinite games. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, and infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play” (Carse, 1986, p. 3). Time, space, and its rules confines the finite game, while the infinite game is a meta-game. In the finite game, there is an ends of winners and losers. In the infinite game, there can be play not only within rules but also play with rules themselves. By discussing the manner in which we do things in forensics, we are engaging in rhetorical conversion, so that the game of forensics can continue. An example of how this has played out previously on the specific subject of oral interpretation comes from Rossi and Goodnow (2006) when suggesting that oral interpretation is not interpretation but performance:

A third solution is probably the easiest and most honest; forensics organizations can recognize the performance style currently practiced and change the name of events to reflect this style. We would propose renaming events to the oral performance of literature. The cat seems to be out of the bag in terms of where the "interpretation" events are headed. In addition, as fewer and fewer coaches have training in traditional oral interpretation, the hopes of returning the forensics activity to its more traditional roots seems remote. Consequently, as coaches and organizers of forensics events we can choose to be honest about what our students are doing. Instead of misdirecting stu-
The part of rhetoric that we, as members of the forensic community are primarily concerned with is the doing of rhetoric. Of course, that which we ask of are students on a daily basis is an arguably insurmountable task and analogous to the task we place on our public speaking classes. We ask forensic students, like public speaking students to master the doing before or concurrent with the learning of theories and logics which inform our doing. Not only do we want, and sometimes demand student mastery of the doing, but that our students doing be (at least perceived as) better than the doing of students from other colleges and universities. In training our students, we are left with an exhausting tension which must be constantly and earnestly negotiated. We, the directors of our forensic teams, are exactly that: directors. It is paramount that just as directors of plays embed theoretical, performative, and logistical reasons within their explanations of directions to actors, we embed our thoughts behind why we tell students to do the things we tell them to do. (p. 161)

In re-conceptualizing the way in which we view the introduction of oral interpretation events, we can revitalize and refresh a small part of a much larger picture. As my assistant coach, Chas Womelsdorf, taught me this year, “Crystal Lane, it is my job to teach the students to read” in oral interpretation events. When taught to read and truly interpret texts without an entirely set, stringent formula for introduction-writing, creativity can truly flourish. One way this kind of true interpretation and creativity can occur is through encouraging our students to make performative, particular, and embodied arguments. Shaunte and I, I believe, performatively affirmed the argument in our introduction through Shaunte’s literature selection, our cutting, blocking, and performance. However, that performative affirmation (at least on my part) was arguably partially seren-
dipitous. By encouraging our students to base argumentation in interpretation introductions on particulars from their literature selections, we may have an abundance of more meaningful arguments and performances.

Endnotes
1. Thank you to the discussion from all of the attendees of the 2008 American Readers’ Theater Association Conference who inspired the addition of this paragraph.

References


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