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**AVOIDING THE SCHISM: AN ASSESSMENT OF ATTITUDES  
TOWARD PERFORMANCE OF LITERATURE  
IN COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENTS**

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**The number of students involved, variety of events, and general popularity  
of oral interpretation competition at current forensics tournaments suggests an**

activity in radiant good health. But this apparent good health may be threatened by controversy between oral interpretation theorists and those involved in competitive interpretation. Concern about the purpose of oral interpretation is responsible for this controversy.

Oral interpretation theorists have constantly reevaluated their positions and emphases among four areas: the communicative act, literary study, self-discovery, and performing art (Pelias, 1985, p. 349). Regardless of emphasis, current theorists suggest a wide range of performance techniques and methods. For example, use of the manuscript, movement, and properties are considered possibilities for any performance, but their use must be determined by the demands of an individual work and not by rules that create a similar performance style for every text (Yordon, 1982; Long & Hopkins, 1982; Lee & Gura, 1987).

Approaches to oral interpretation in forensics, however, have remained constant. The present rules guiding competition do not allow a variety of performance approaches and thus contribute to the tension between academic and contest interpretation.

Recent programs and articles express concern about the state of oral interpretation competition, but little action has resulted. The purpose of this study was to assess coaches' attitudes toward the current state of forensic interpretation, and to propose a rationale for change that integrates the viewpoints of interpretation theorists and forensics participants.

Once the emphasis is placed by chairmen, coaches, and judges alike on the literature, then the criteria of performance can center on the experience of the [individual work] of literature, and not on artificial and unmalleable rules ... [or] some preconceived standard of performance. ... We may never be able to agree on rules which should govern performance, because each piece of literature presents different problems.

(Stevens, 1965, p. 121) Although these comments by Phillip Boyd Stevens were made in 1965, he might have been summarizing the position of contemporary theorists toward contest interpretation. Other statements by Stevens further illustrate that the problems he examined more than two decades ago remain. For example, in considering whether the presence of the manuscript distinguishes the interpreter from the actor Stevens suggests that, "The reader who has the book removed from his presence does not become an actor any more than the actor becomes a reader if a book is thrust into his hands" (pp. 117-118). Later Stevens argues that the handling of the book "can decrease focus on the literature rather than increase attention to it" (p. 118). "Too often," he concludes, "acting is simply a term applied to bad interpreting" (p. 120).

Concern about the purpose of oral interpretation and the differences between its "academic" and "contest" forms precedes Stevens' article by more

than 30 years (Garns, 1912; Winans, 1914; Saunders, 1931; Heaps, 1934; Dennis, 1936; Irwin, 1941), but it is not until the 1980s that the concern becomes widespread and constant. For example, at the 1983 action caucus on oral interpretation in forensics competition, James Pearse suggested that: Diversity of approach is good. Diversity of reaction by judges is also good. If interpretation is communication we must expect different reactions as we do in oratory or extemporaneous speaking. ... [But] Conventions exist in forensics such as requiring the use of a manuscript [that] create a more restrictive environment than a classroom. (Holloway, 1983, p. 55) At the same caucus, Jeanine Rice Barr claimed that the objectives of competition must be communicated to both "the academic discipline of oral interpretation and ... the forensics circuit" (p. 48). The caucus concluded with six recommendations for improvement that might have been palatable to both theorists and competitors, but neither the American Forensic Association nor the National Forensic Association ever acted upon them.

In 1984, Ronald J. Pelias presented empirical evidence suggesting that inconsistency in judging may result from different viewpoints about the fundamental purpose of the interpretive act. More interestingly, Pelias pointed out that "the view of interpretation as a method of literary study appears to influence few critics' evaluative comments" (p. 220), although the literary study approach would include many of today's prominent theorists (Sloane & Maclay, 1972; Bacon, 1979; Yordon, 1982; Long & Hopkins, 1982; Lee & Gura, 1987).

In 1985, Deborah Geisler argued that: Often competitive interpretation bears little resemblance to work done in non-competitive settings. ... Concepts of the text in forensics differ radically from what the text is understood to be by scholars. ... Oral interpretation guidelines in competitive settings are sufficiently restrictive as to negate honest explications of text based on any theory.

(p. 71) Geisler further suggested that the rules for competitive forensics were "rather arbitrary" and "decades out of date" (p.

77). Such anachronistic rules, she stated, permitted only one "right" way of staging a text, and thus did not reflect current interpretation theory. Geisler concluded that "as a judge, I find myself frustrated because I have seen how oral interpretation can be done in an environment of freedom to experiment and create" (p. 79).

In 1986, Jerry W. Mathis reported that the consensus of an SCA Interpretation Division task force was that "contests did, indeed, not reflect the discipline as otherwise academically constituted. It was felt that contest rules and judging showed limited evidence of current performance theory" (Holloway, 1986, p. 61). Such findings drew objections from some of those involved in forensics (Keefe, in Holloway, 1986), but Mathis persuasively

pointed out that forensics has resisted recognizing that the field of interpretation is in the midst of fundamental change. For example, Mathis mentioned that even the term "oral interpretation" is gradually being replaced by the broader "performance studies," and that the newer views of interpretation as literary study and performance art are especially resistant to the confinement of rules. Mathis concluded by suggesting that the two areas may never reconcile, but move further apart. "One is moved to speculate," he stated, "whether each or either of the fields will be enriched by the split and to wonder what might be lost" (p. 64).

A satisfactory response to more than 20 years of worrying and arguing about the purpose, rules and judging of events (Hopkins, 1960; Rhodes, 1972; Ballard, 1986; Wardrope, 1988), requires descriptive research to ascertain the status of forensic interpretation and empirical research to determine its effects (Holloway, 1986). Keefe stated: Without these studies, forensic educators do not know if defense of the status quo, minor repairs, or rigorous reform should be the response to criticism.

If the forensic community follows its teaching that contentions should be supported by sufficient, recent, varied and trustworthy evidence, then it will realize that its immediate task is to develop hypotheses and conduct useful research on its own activities. (p. 65) Accordingly, the study reported here investigates competitive interpretation by examining coaches' attitudes and perspectives in an effort to determine whether it should maintain the status quo, make "minor repairs," or undertake "rigorous reform." Method Instrument To determine coaches' attitudes, a sixteen-item summated rating scale was developed. Demographic information was collected that included school size, years coached, and years spent as a competitor. Finally, the instrument included six brief discussion questions that pertained to oral interpretation theory. The content of the instrument was derived from recurring concerns mentioned in the literature, from two panel discussions on Individual Events at the 1986 annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, and from informal conversations with interpretation theorists and forensic coaches.

A pilot study was conducted during the Spring of 1987.

Since this study revealed that reactions to the state of competitive interpretation were mixed, a larger, nationally representative study was justified. For the national study only one significant change was made in the instrument: a forced choice statement concerning rules for competition was changed to a discussion question. Because adherence to rules distinguished competitive from academic interpretation, a discussion question was appropriate since coaches could express opinions more fully.

Other changes included rewording of some statements to decrease ambiguity and omitting the question pertaining to school size because it was found that this was unrelated to coaching competency.

Sample respondents were coaches at the 1987 American Forensic Association's National Individual Events Tournament (AFA-NIET).

During the second round of competition, those judging the oral interpretation events received a copy of the instrument. Of the 80 instruments distributed, 43 were returned. Given the circumstances, i.e., during a tournament, the return rate of 53% was considered satisfactory.

Data were analyzed to assess (1) how satisfied coaches were about their knowledge of interpretation; and (2) how satisfied they were with oral interpretation in forensics competition. In addition, a comparison was made of the responses from those who felt the rules were too restrictive with those who felt the rules were not too restrictive.

Results Table 1 presents the percentage of coaches who agreed with each statement. Column I represents the percentage of coaches who strongly agreed or agreed with the statement (SA/A). Column II represents the percentages of those who neither agreed nor disagreed (N). Column III represents the percentages of those who either disagreed or strongly disagreed (D/SD).

TABLE 1  
Results from the AFA-NIET

	I (SA/A)	II (N)	III (D/SD)
1. I am qualified to coach oral interpretation events.	92.5%	5.0%	2.5%
2. I have a basic understanding of oral interpretation theory.	92.5%	5.0%	2.5%
3. There is a difference between how oral interpretation is taught in the classroom and how it is coached for individual events competition.	72.5%	20.0%	7.5%
4. There should be differences between how oral interpretation is taught in the classroom and how it is coached for individual events competition.	27.5%	32.5%	40.0%
5. Most coaches are qualified to teach oral interpretation in the classroom.	15.0%	30.0%	55.0%
6. The rules for oral interpretation competition have kept pace with the development of oral interpretation theory.	27.5%	40.0%	32.5%
7. Knowledge of oral interpretation theory is necessary to produce winning competitors.	45.0%	12.5%	42.5%
8. Oral interpretation events provide students with an important educational experience.	92.5%	7.5%	
9. Most of the students I coach fully understand the literature they perform.	62.5%	17.5%	20.0%
10. Results of competition indicate that			

understanding the literature is less important than how it is performed.	47.5%	15.0%	37.5%
11. Knowledge of oral interpretation theory is necessary to coach oral interpretation.	65.0%	10.0%	25.0%
12. I am qualified to judge oral interpretation events.	97.5%	2.5%	
13. I coach oral interpretation the way I teach (or would teach) a course in oral interpretation.	57.5%	12.5%	30.0%
14. Knowledge of literary theory is necessary to coach oral interpretation.	50.0%	25.0%	25.0%
15. I would take advantage of an opportunity to learn more about oral interpretation at a festival or convention.	77.5%	15.0%	7.5%

In response to the discussion question, "Do you feel that the performance rules in oral interpretation events are too restrictive?," 36% indicated yes, 57.5% indicated no, and 10% provided no response. Twenty-six of the 36 respondents who answered this question provided justification. Some of the coaches who disagreed stated that competitive oral interpretation and classroom interpretation are distinct genres. Most who disagreed, however, believed there is a clear distinction between acting and interpretation, and that "providing restraint forces performers to concentrate on those things that are central to interpretation, like voice, facial expression, and gesture." Others suggested interpretation is different from acting because it is "subtle," "suggestive," and "not fully staged." Of the nine who agreed that the rules are too restrictive and justified their response, all except one referred to restrictions on movement and required use of manuscript as sometimes preventing "full interpretation of the literature." One called these rules "archaic" and a "throwback." Another stated that the movement away from declamation and towards artistic performance should allow the freedom to use "whatever will bring the literature to fullest fruit." Many mentioned "the inane arguments" about the differences between interpretation and acting.

Eighteen respondents provided additional comments. Of these, the most interesting were those who provided opposing viewpoints regarding the definition of oral interpretation in forensic competition. One coach asserted: I would like to see them stop referring to competitive speech interpretation as oral interpretation. I think that this connection has made it difficult at best to legitimize forensics. In other words, keep oral interpretation to festivals and separate educational activities.

However, another coach stated: [To be] in line with current theory, we should rename these events "performance of literature." "Oral interpretation" is an outmoded term, and distinctions between oral interpretation and acting are no longer an important consideration. These are performance events, and thus,

the performers should be allowed to use all aspects of physical and vocal communication to communicate a text. Make holding a script optional.

Or, do away with it all together and allow performers full range of movement and use of simple set pieces like a table and chair. I would also favor eliminating off-stage focus for duo performances. This is another rule that seems to encourage mechanical trickery rather than honest, present tense communication of a literary text.

The coaches who indicated they felt the rules were too restrictive (n = 13) and those who felt they were not too restrictive (n = 22) were compared on their responses to the 15 statements using a multiple discriminant analysis (MDA). (Given the small # for this analysis the results should be interpreted with caution.) MDA analysis considers the independent variables as a set and determines the best combination and weighting of them that maximally separates the groups. For this analysis, the 15 items on the instrument served as the independent variables, and how coaches responded to the question about the rules served as the dependent variable.

Table 2 presents the results of the MDA analysis. The table includes the MDA function (with standardized weights assigned each of the variables entered into the discriminant function equation) and group centroids (indicating the degree of separation in the discriminant function space). The MDA was followed by a classification matrix to test the accuracy of the results: a score for each respondent was generated based on the discriminant function; and then, based on this scale coaches were classified as "feeling the rules were too restrictive" or as "feeling the rules were not too restrictive." The overall percentage of correct classifications was 94.29% (100% correct classification for the coaches who felt the rules were too restrictive and 90.9% correct classification for those who felt the rules were not too restrictive: (1, N = 35) = 23.59, # < .001). Given the # and chi-square, theta (a measure of effect size) was found to equal .82. This is an extremely large effect size and indicates a high degree of accuracy in the predictions made by the MDA (Cohen, 1977).

TABLE 2  
Results of the MDA  
MDA Function

I have a basic understanding of oral interpretation theory.	-0.834
There is a difference between how oral interpretation is taught in the classroom and how it is coached for individual events competition.	0.680
Most coaches are qualified to teach oral interpretation in the classroom.	0.581
The rules for oral interpretation events have kept pace with the development of oral interpretation theory.	0.971
Oral interpretation events provide students with an important	

educational experience.	0.399
Results of competition indicate that under- standing the literature is less important than how it is performed.	0.445
Knowledge of oral interpretation theory is necessary to coach oral interpretation.	-0.419
I am qualified to judge oral interpretation events.	-1.025
I would take advantage of an opportunity to to learn more about oral interpretation at a festival or convention.	0.542
CENTROIDS Rules too restrictive	-1.649
Rules not too restrictive	0.974

The variables most relevant for distinguishing between the two groups of coaches were those with the highest discriminant function weights. Table 2 presents the weights for the variables that entered into the discriminant function. To organize these variables, the sign associated with the group centroid and the sign with the discriminant function must be taken into account.

To be maximally associated with a particular group, a respondent should score high on those items with the same sign as the group centroid and low on those items with the opposite sign. The result of this association is the archetypal or characteristic profile of each group.

Results of the MDA reveal clear distinctions between those who felt the rules were too restrictive and those who did not.

Those who felt the rules were too restrictive also felt that: a) they were qualified to judge, b) the rules were outdated, c) they knew oral interpretation theory, d) oral interpretation in the classroom and in competition did not differ, e) most coaches were unqualified to teach oral interpretation in the classroom, and f) they would not attend a workshop on coaching. In contrast, those who felt the rules were not too restrictive felt that: a) they were less qualified to judge, b) the rules were not outdated, c) they were less familiar with oral interpretation theory, d) oral interpretation in the classroom and in competition do differ, e) most coaches were qualified to teach oral interpretation in the classroom, and f) they would attend a workshop on coaching.

Discussion The percentage responses and MDA results suggest several contradictions. Analysis of the percentage responses reveals three contradictions related to coaches qualifications, distinctions between academic and competitive interpretation, and knowledge of interpretation theory. First, when evaluating their own qualifications, knowledge, and teaching skill, the coaches rated themselves extremely high. For example, when the five statements asking for self perception were averaged, 80.1% of the respondents rated themselves as highly competent. Yet, when asked to state whether other coaches were qualified to teach classroom interpretation, only 15% found most of their colleagues qualified.

The second contradiction concerns the differences between teaching in the

classroom and coaching for competition. Approximately three-quarters of the respondents agreed there is a difference between the way oral interpretation is taught in the classroom and the way it is coached for competition, but only one-quarter stated there should be a difference. Again, however, the coaches were not consistent: the data revealed that only a little more than half do (or would) teach and coach using the same approach. This leaves about one-quarter of those who should be dissatisfied unaccounted for.

The third contradiction concerns the necessity for knowing theories of interpretation and literature. Sixty-five percent of the respondents claimed that knowledge of oral interpretation theory is necessary to coach, but only 45% thought such knowledge necessary to produce winning competitors. In other words, while a majority agreed that a coach needs knowledge of interpretation theory to coach, less than half thought it necessary to win.

Furthermore, only 50% of the respondents thought knowledge of literary theory was necessary to coach events that use literature as their base content.

Analysis of the MDA results suggest a final contradiction: competitors are being trained and judged by coaches who disagree about the rules, theory, methodology, and purpose of competitive interpretation. Given such fundamental disagreements, it is not surprising that so many tournaments end with both coaches and competitors angry and dissatisfied.

It is tempting to suggest that the contradictions result simply from a willingness or unwillingness to assimilate and utilize current theory, but it is more helpful to consider why the rhetorical events have not been subject to the same series of controversies as the interpretation events.

A possible answer is that academic theory and competitive practice in the rhetorical events are congruent, while in the interpretation events they are not. A significant conflict might be expected in any area where skills and practice reflect only part of the breadth of theory, and this study makes clear that such a case exists in forensic interpretation. The research further suggests that the perpetuation--either intentionally or unintentionally--of the conflict between academic and forensic interpretation could lead to a lasting schism (Holloway, 1986, p. 64).

The implications of this schism are disturbing since they ultimately question the philosophy and purpose of forensic competition. Educator/coaches in the rhetorical events have made certain that the content, analysis, and delivery techniques appearing in competition are identical to current theories of rhetoric, public address, and communication studies. Surely no coach would train students based on outdated theories or suggest a narrow range of practices when a wider one is required. Yet, this study indicates that some educator/coaches in interpretation are doing exactly that. Whether they do this because they believe it is correct or because they wish to abide by the rules, their students are learning methods that do not reflect current theory.

"Oral interpretation" is becoming "performance studies," a field that includes not only performances of artistic literature with a manuscript in hand, but also performances drawn from a wider variety of texts that demand both restricted behaviors and full enactment. Educator/coaches must recognize this by preparing competitors in oral interpretation events exactly as they prepare competitors in rhetorical events: with training firmly grounded in contemporary theory.

**Conclusion and Recommendations** Although the present study indicates that the conflict between academic and forensic interpretation is a serious one, radical changes in policy are not necessary to begin resolving it. Instead, we recommend that the national forensic associations adopt the following rule changes for a one year test period: Prose Interpretation: A selection or selections of prose material of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source. Play cuttings are prohibited. Use of manuscript and movement are optional. Maximum time is 10 minutes including introduction.

**Poetry Interpretation:** A selection or selections of poetry of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source.

Play cuttings are prohibited. Use of manuscript and movement are optional. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

**Dramatic Interpretation:** A cutting which represents one or more characters from a play or plays of literary merit. This material may be drawn from stage, screen, or radio. Use of manuscript and movement are optional. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

**Duo Interpretation:** A cutting from a play, humorous or serious, involving the portrayal of two or more characters presented by two individuals. This material may be drawn from stage, screen, or radio. Use of manuscript and staging should be determined by performance concept and by the demands of the text. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

If adopted, these changes could be reevaluated after a year's time and further action taken. Thus, in a conservative but significant fashion, forensic interpretation could temporarily align current theory and practice. If the discoveries made from this alignment are enabling ones, then the rules should be changed permanently.

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#### NOTES

These suggestions included: (1) Selections for oral interpretation of prose and poetry to be taken from a list of twenty-five authors; (2) A mode of poetry, lyric, dramatic or epic should be chosen for reading for a specified in-

terim. In the discussion such terms as narrative, ballad, and the proverbs were also used; (3) Copies of the selections to be read should be submitted before the forensic tournament; (4) Judges should be assigned according to training and experience. A pool could be formed asking professors active in forensics to identify their areas of expertise on the tournament invitation or registration forms; (5) Recognized scholars in oral interpretation should criticize the quality of interpretation after the final round is completed and the judges' ballots have been submitted; (6) Students should present justification or arguments for their interpretation as introductions to their reading (Holloway, 1983, p. 58).

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