Communicating Literature: Theory and Perceptions

Communicative Intent in the Performance of Literature

The three functions of oral interpretation (textual analysis, communicative intent, and performance skills) sometimes divide scholars along demarcation lines. Textual analysis proponents stress the over-riding importance of understanding how a text feels and of interpretive choices. Communicative intent advocates view literature as a means to share and ultimately influence performers and audiences with intrinsic messages. Performance skill supporters emphasize the nuances and levels of character portrayal as paramount. All three functions require balance and mutual dependency, but without neglecting the other two functions this text centers on the importance of performing literature so that an oral text becomes a communicative message.

Scholars generally agree that oral interpretation is simultaneously an art as well as a communicative act. Wallace Bacon acknowledges the special use of performance:

It [oral interpretation] may be given a specific rhetorical or forensics slant; it may select one dominant attitude from a piece and emphasize that . . . to make a particular point a reader or a program may wish to stress.¹

But he speaks for other scholars in cautioning rhetorical performers to remember that, “For the interpreter, the literary text lives, is, it does not only say; it does not only tell.”² Bacon’s point is clear: while looking for a text’s rhetorical message, do not neglect the aesthetics of form and composition—the text itself.

Assuming an underlying commitment to balancing textual analysis and performance skills, why should a “communicative theory” of performance predominate? First, the performance of texts provides perceptual alternatives in attitudes. Exposure to a variety of textual perspectives can raise consciousness, effect attitude-change or maintenance, and possibly result in behavior alteration. Second, specialized formats such as prose and drama can influence due to the innate human affinity for narrativity.³ We move away from or reinforce our value systems with continued exposure to narrative opportunities. And third, when literature is performed there is measurably greater comprehension, empathic response, and the achievement of cognitive and behavioral changes.⁴
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Advantages of Communicative Perspective To Oral Performance of Literature

1. Provides perceptual alternatives in attitudes.
2. Influence due to human affinity for narrativity.
3. Greater comprehension, empathetic responses, and achievement of cognitive and behavioral changes.

Figure 3.1

One should not wholeheartedly embrace the communicative intent perspective without recognizing its potential for abuse. No performer should force a text to communicate a message it is not saying. Performers should avoid isolating features of a text and claiming that the isolated message indicates the entire text. And no performer has the right to re-write significant portions of another author’s text to conform to the chosen communicative intent.

What Constitutes a “Text”?

Most people think of a “text” as a written published example of literature. Recent changes in the perception and choices of performance venues have forced us to expand our notion of the nature of “text.” The study of “performance” has provided vast newly discovered examples of “text.” A text may include a personal narrative, a folk or fairy tale, an elaborate myth, a ritual, a ceremony, or a symbolic representation of an important message (e.g., the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., the “Wall of Prayers” at Bellevue Hospital in New York City following the 9/11 catastrophe, or a Picasso sculpture). A text may draw on both oral and written histories.

A “text” such as this one you hold in your hands cannot claim to guide you to an introduction to all “texts” in the course of one quarter or semester of study. Thus, this “text” focuses on the performance of literary texts, originally written or printed as novels, short stories, poems, song lyrics, plays, essays, Internet blogs, speeches, or reports. This course in oral interpretation can merely introduce you to the performance of literary texts. However, you should always be open to exploring the wider expanses of “text” which include oral texts as well as written ones. A new concept in “text” has arrived via social media in the form of “vlogging.” While an Internet blog may be linguistically textual, a “vlog” communicates a text through video images. One of the more popular vloggers is Zoe Sugg, whose media musings have been transcribed into book/print form with two best-sellers, Girl
Online (2014) and Girl Online: On Tour (2015). As of December 2015, Sugg’s primary YouTube channel has over 9.5 million subscribers and she has had over 625 million video views.

You must continually commit yourself to studying the “text” you choose to perform. A performance of any text without study or analysis fails to prepare you as a performer or a listening audience for the deep layers of meaning and interpretation awaiting the treasure-seeker. Kaplan and Mohrmann argue that there is clear evidence to support the notion inviting the audience to hear an oral performance of a literary text alters the way they “study” and “understand” a text. In their 1975 quantitative study they suggest that “the oral interpreter does, in fact, perceive literature in ways that differ from the response of a more passive participant.”

Maintaining a balance of perspective is paramount in understanding any theory of the oral interpretation of literature. In the next section, while borrowing an application of psychologist Fritz Heider’s “Balance Theory,” this interdependent balance is described.

Interdependency of: Literature/Interpreter/Observer

A rudimentary, interdependent relationship occurs in oral interpretation with the literary text, the interpreter/performer, and the observers in the audience:

Positive relationships (indicated by the “+” signs) between the literature and the interpreter occur when: (1) Pre-performance textual analysis by the interpreter isolates the choices of perspective; (2) Pre-performance textual analysis reveals a prominent rhetorical message to share; (3) Actual performance choices remain true to the text itself. Positive relationships between the interpreter and the observer are maintained when: (1) The interpreter’s performance choices entertain, persuade, and provide literary elucidation; (2) The observers offer identifiable feedback, reactions both verbal and nonverbal to the perceived performance; (3) The interpreter adjusts, conforms, and builds upon the performance choices in view of observer feedback. And positive relationships between the observer and the literary text ensue when: (1) The text as performed is in an understandable language, with an inherent sense of uniqueness, freshness, and individuality; (2) The level of textual sophistication, use of vocabulary, and syntactical format is appropriate; (3) The text stimulates rather than offends the audience; (4) The text has an appeal due to its universality (i.e., it says important ideas to all people in all times).
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To help in understanding this relationship, consider having a discussion in class to discuss examples of negativity (represented by the “–” signs) in the triangular relationships. Under what circumstances does a negative relationship occur? Possible breakdowns in the relationships could occur because of: (1) Offensive literary choices; (2) Inappropriate or ill-chosen texts, due to age constraints, educational background, religious affiliation, etc.; (3) Poor performer presentational skills (e.g., too soft in volume, breaking character when reading a line in error, extreme nervousness); (4) Lack of interpreter’s sensitivity to feedback and necessary adjustments; (5) Inability of observers to listen or pay attention to literary context. What other potential breakdowns might occur? What would one have to do to restore the positive relationship once it is severed?

In the next segment the three component parts are described individually. With each variable you will find helpful advice to assist you as you anticipate your first class presentations.

Literature as Message

You will need to consider the size and time constraints in the OI course when choosing a literary selection to read in class. You must be sensitive to the length of your selection. How long does it take to read the selection aloud? You may have to edit or cut out portions if you have a specific time constraint. Some pieces may have to be passed over because editing to the class time constraint is difficult or inherently destructive to the text’s message.

Next, is the text oral (i.e., does it “sound” understandable?) and can it be read aloud? Many great works of literature are difficult to perform orally because of complexity, form, and train of thought. Choose literature for performance that is written in credible dialogue or vivid narrative or rhythmic tone.

For the text to be able to have an impact on the observer it must be appropriately chosen. By merely listening and observing, can one follow the point of the text? If it has an underlying message, moral, or theme, does the literature itself make the main point clear? A text needs dynamic qualities to maintain interest also: emotional range, vibrant use of descriptive language, scenes that anticipate a climax, etc.

How do you discover a communicative “message” in a literary selection? You may discover clues in the author’s treatment of conflict or dialogic interplay between characters or rhetorical statements in sentences or stanzas. You should also develop an intuitive ability to find a communicative message in unusual texts. Consider choosing to read from a comic book or a comic book movie screenplay. Los Angeles Times reporter Patt Morrison asked Stan Lee, creator of Marvel Comics about “messages” in his comic books and the movies and he replied,

We now have more intelligent people reading these things, older people as well as the youngsters; the X-Men are not just a bunch of mutants fighting each other; they deal with bigotry and is it right to hate and distrust people who are different. There are all sorts of messages in a book like “The X-Men.”

Does a text have one true interpretation? If it is a complex, quality-composed piece of literature, multiple “interpretations” should be apparent. While any text may have many interpretations to
choose from, not all choices for interpretation are wise. Some theorists claim that it no longer mat-
ters what a text means; a text can mean whatever the reader/performer wants. However, if you argue
that a text can mean anything or everything, then you must grant that any text is meaningless since
it has no unique message to share or insight to provide commonality for discussion or analysis. A
more pragmatic approach to textual criticism contends that texts, while capable of multiple interpre-
trations, have better choices for meaningful interpretation. The insightful performer scrutinizes the
text for possible choices of interpretation and becomes persuaded by a rational process of critical evalu-
tion to focus the performance on the most logical choice. This choice of interpretation becomes
the communicative message for the oral interpreter, but observers modify the interpretation when
they witness it, due to the cognitive filters of their own experiences, associations, and interpretation
of the text.

**Interpreter as Translator**

Before ever stepping foot in front of an audience, the oral interpreter must have a clear under-
standing of the chosen meaning of the performance text and the rationale for interpretive choices. It
is as if the reader has said, “I’ve studied this text. I know some background about the author as well
as some intuitive assessments from ‘reading between the lines.’ I know how the text makes me feel. I
have decided on some performance choices that are creative but justifiable in light of my scrutiny dur-
ing analysis. As I understand it, this text means this . . . .”

Now the interpreter takes on the role of translator. The performer reads, dramatizes, vocalizes,
and nonverbally renders the text into a public presentation. As a “conduit,” the performer transfers
the words, nuances, and communicative aspects of the literature to an anticipatory audience.
Frequently, the actual performance generates additional choices in interpretation during the presen-
tation. While performing a text, it is as if a reader is also saying, “I am making these choices of inter-
pretation now as I share consistently my decisions of what the text means to me. In this very moment
of the actual performance, I believe my spontaneous actions and approaches are consistent as well.”

Unlike a speech or debate, the performer of literature should not re-write a text with personal
intrusions that blatantly offer persuasive options. The performer allows the text to influence. While it
is true that as you perform a text you take ownership of that text, you must exercise responsibility
along with that ownership. Responsibility must include a firm commitment to analysis of the text that
should never exclude external factors in the creative process. The external factors are amalgamations
of your own creative choices coupled with studied attempts to discover an author’s implied intent or
motivations. A performer can, however, provide a basis for evaluating the text’s message and this
occurs most frequently in originally composed introductions and transitions.

**Introductions as Justification for Performance Choices**

You were presented in chapter one with the necessary components of what needs to be included
in an introduction. But it is essential that you realize how crucial the introduction is to the under-
standing of the communicative intent of an oral reading program.

Typically, beginning performers fail to establish an introduction that establishes a theme, a the-
sis, a communicative intent, an “argument,” or information that justifies their performance choices.
A communicative approach to oral interpretation stresses that any performance can be viewed in its entirety as an example of an “argument” for evaluation. Thus, an introduction which only describes a context or characters fails to provide the most important part: when the performance is completed, you should be able to describe the primary “message” in terms of an argument for consideration and discussion. Your professor may decide to test the audience’s perceptions and see if they can approximate the communicative intent or argument that you as a performer intended. “So, what was Pam’s performative thesis? Can you tell me and put it into a sentence?” might be a question you could hear in class.

Sometimes a performer will approximate the “argument” or the “thesis” for the presentation by merely offering a “topic.” For example, a program that purports to be a sharing of biographical information about a famous person (e.g., people’s recollections who knew the notorious rock star, Tupak Shakur, coupled with his own words) may be introduced as “literature by and about a famous person (e.g., Tupak).” This “topical” connection needs to go to the next communicative level and indicate in the introduction some factor or reason to justify listening to a program “about Tupak Shakur” to create a “reason” to ascertain whether or not performance choices do in fact support a “performance thesis.” A program that is about “mothers” is based on a “topic”; a program that creates the justification that “mothers suffer the most in times of war” establishes a “communicative intent” for which literary selections in the program serve as “proof” that the “thesis” is true.

Without a clearly communicative introduction the words which preface the performance become what Koeppel and Morman call “meaningless phatic introductory talk.” Saying something as vague as “life forces you to confront reality” is insufficient to establish a clear “thesis” or “argument” to justify your performance choices. In fact, such a statement is so vague that it could introduce virtually all literature. Construct and deliver an introduction with sufficient information to assist an audience in critical evaluation of your performance act. Your instructor should be able to ask observers in the classroom to provide in a complete sentence the “thesis” of each performance. At a minimum your fellow classmates should be able to confirm what your “topic” was, but you will have reached success if the audience comes close to stating in a sentence what you were attempting to share publicly in the oral reading. Certainly the exciting breadth of literary interpretation and perceptual data offers multiple “theses,” but this is the power of literature and performance. We are made better human beings by dialoguing about the messages we hear and see performed. A fine and exciting performance should elicit commentary that focuses on a central theme or intent that can be shared by all involved.

At the end of chapter one, you discovered an exercise to find the best choice for an introduction to the Dylan Thomas poem, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.” In actuality, either introductory choice could be valid and since a text can have several meanings it would be incorrect to label one introduction or approach as “wrong.” What we can “argue” however, is that some “choices” for interpretation are better. In the case of the introduction that linked a kindly grandmother to the Thomas poem, it could be a valid (perhaps even emotional) link to a textual interpretation, but the second introduction, relaying information about Dylan Thomas’ own life was contextually more accurate. Your job as a performer and the audience’s task as observers are to seek out the rationales for establishing better and hopefully, more creative and interesting performance choices.
Observers as Receptors/Responders/Critics

Observers, witnesses to the performance of literature, receive verbal and nonverbal stimuli to assist them in re-assembling the selected text in the arena of their imaginations. Audience members absorb the presentation and react to the intrinsic communicative message of the text in a number of ways.

An audience member may think, “I agree with this text. It matches with my own experiences and associations. I was entertained/reinforced in my own belief system.” Hopefully, friendly smiles and nods or other confirming feedback variables share the sensation of agreement.

Another audience observer may think, “I don’t agree with this text’s perspective. It alienated and offended me. It certainly does not reflect my own experiences and associations. I want nothing to do with even imagining such scenes.” Frowns, discomfort, angry expressions, and lack of attention may imply that the text persuaded negatively.

Others in the audience seem nonplussed: “I can objectively listen to this text as a unique literary text, but I have no strong commitment to acting on its premise. You’ve raised my consciousness, but that’s all.” Polite attention is noted from these observers, but meager feedback of any kind suggests lack of commitment to an assessment of a text’s communicative center.

And finally there is the observer who thinks, “What? What was that? I’m totally lost, getting bored, and will think about something else.” The feedback from this member is clear enough: “The text is not interesting to me; my mind is on other matters; I don’t remember anything you just read.”

Each of these examples represents how a text is received. The observer also acts as evaluative critic. (More details about the role of the critic will be discussed in chapter twelve.) But why is the observer an important part of the interdependent relationships of the communicative act of oral interpretation?

It is not enough to perform; you must also observe other performers. You cannot learn how to develop your own personal style of performance if you only occasionally come to class to perform, or watch a few of your peers read aloud. Observation is a key to growth in performance. In so doing, you learn analytical skill choices from observing how others perceived a text. You add to your own developing style as a performer by observing how others use verbal and nonverbal skills. You are introduced to authors and texts that may encourage you to look at other examples in style or authorship. You may be persuaded to sustain or reconsider values.

With previous explanations suggesting preconditions for the communicative aspects of the performance of literature, the following model delineates the relationships and persuasive nature of oral interpretation.

A Communication Model for Oral Interpretation

Explanation of the Model

The term suasion in the model refers to various aspects of influence. Suasion urges alterations in beliefs or positions; it also strengthens previously held values. Suasion uses argument, entreaty, exposal, even narratives to influence. In chapter one, the communicative intent of literature in
performance was described as an “argument” or a “thesis.” An introduction to a performance establishes a premise that is supported and sustained by the presentational choices of the performer. In this theoretical view of performance the performer is expected to offer choices that clearly support the established “theme” or “claim” offered by the literature. Jay VerLinden refers to this approach as the “metacritical model” for the performance of literature. He suggests that such communicative claims could consist of uniqueness, universality, suggestion, or philosophy. “An alternative to making a claim in the introduction about the literature is to make a claim about some aspect of life and use the literature as support for that claim.”

Figure 3.3 Model of the Communicative Interpretation of Literature Process

Though an inherent component of the oral interpretation process, suasion is not license to force a message or idea. The interpreter who perceives the performance as
merely a forum to force compliance with a preset agenda no longer persuades with a text, but coerces. Coercion, although retaining some features of persuasion, distorts the communicative act by relying on forced compliance, restricted thinking, and threat. If suasion is to be productive, it should happen as a natural result of a process, not because a performer forces a message. Suasion need not result in conversion or alteration of beliefs or behaviors, either. Suasion is not based on a single act, but the cognitive decision to allow influence to occur, based on multiple suasory incidents. A performance that elicits questions concerning the message is as much an example of suasion as an observable change in behavior or beliefs.

The relationship between the literary text and the interpreter impresses the communicative message. In the analysis process the performer discovers the primary communicative intent of the text. The text impresses or affects the interpreter in a direct stimulus that is the initial suasion stage. Much like a stamp with ink leaves a “mark” so too does a “text” leave such an impression on the interpreter.

The interpreter and observers carry on reciprocal suasory acts in a stimulus/response pattern. Having made an analytical decision about the primary message of the text, the interpreter evokes or recreates imaginatively the message in a performance aimed at the observers. After absorbing the suasory attempt, the observers respond to the attempt. This feedback response provokes or directs attention to the initiated action, allowing the interpreter to discern how the performance and shared message are being received.

Ideally, while the stimulus/response process is going on between interpreter and observer, the text arouses the observer to respond to it in a suasory manner. A text may figuratively awaken an audience from sleep or boredom; a text may excite or stimulate or pique interest. Even though a performer is the means to share the text, the text becomes an integral part of the communicative influence process.

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Dangers Leading to an Imbalanced View of Communication/Rhetorical Core of Interpretation

1. Forcing a text to persuade or say a message it does not intend.

2. Removing or down-playing the inherent texture and tone for the “Almighty Message.”

3. Deliberate distortion of author’s words by re-writing.

4. Suasion by virtue of the performer’s skill rather than the text’s message or observer’s intellectual/emotional perceptions.

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Figure 3.4
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To bring to life a text, a performer must **recreate** the scene of the text initially and allow the observers to re-create the textual experience. The realm for this recreation is in the mind. Another way of understanding this is to say that the location of the literary experience is no longer merely on the page of a text being read but ultimately in the minds of the listening audience. Because of the variety of experiences and associations, the actual scenes will differ in each one’s mind. It is as if separate, unique, yet shared layers of experiences and associations were superimposed over the literature, the interpreter, and the observer. And all experiences and associations validate the communicative process.

**Conclusion**

Sometimes a performer of literature can stumble into the danger zone and not realize it. While juxtaposing various genres of literature, thematically connected or at least topically connected, a performer presenting a program oral interpretation (mixed interpretation program) may associate multiple texts without transitions that alter what textual analysis might imply about one or many texts. For example, to make a mixed interpretive program seem gender specific to the performer, the performer alters the pronouns to one’s own gender to “make it work.” The original text may have intended the other gender perspective and so the original message is distorted. Even in a classroom setting, protected by educational fair use, any performer could be legally liable for deliberately distorting an author’s work for purposes of “making it work.”

While a communicative approach to the performance of literature can be intriguing and stimulating, dangers of excessive commitment to discovering a rhetorical core must be avoided. Forcing a text to persuade or say a message it does not intend by deliberately misleading introductions or performance choices is a distortion of the activity. Removing, altering, or downplaying the true texture of a text in favor of an Almighty Message is misguided. Deliberate distortion of a text by extensive rewriting is a form of plagiarism or literary theft. Much care must be taken in juxtaposing several segments of texts if you compare more than one author’s works. Editing, re-assembling and moving sentences and dialogue to new contexts must always be done with commitment to retaining the original author’s integrity of text. Suasion by virtue of a performer’s skills rather than an inherent textual message or observers’ cognitive abilities short-circuits the literary appreciation objective of the performance of literature.

But as text, performer, and audience come together in a healthy, balanced relationship, suasion leads beyond a mere text. Humanity is blessed with opportunities to grow, mature, and change because of the study and performance of literature.
References


Notes


3. Walter Fisher argues from the premise that “humans as rhetorical beings are as much valuing as they are reasoning animals.” (“Toward A Logic of Good Reasons,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 64 (1978), 376). He links this valuing concept to the realm of fiction and stories in his *Narrative Paradigm* and argues that the storyteller influences and can ultimately persuade an audience to consider altering accepted values and morality. See: “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984), 1–22.


