Toward a Conceptual Justification for Duo Interpretation

DAVID C. KLOPE*

Within forensics, the event of duo interpretation has been a vague entity since its inception. The central reason for this ambiguity has been the lack of any conceptual justification for the practice of duo as a distinct form. Although duo is clearly related to solo interpretation and readers theatre, it is practiced separately and has never been related formally to either of these other forms. Further, no work has ever been published that explicitly delineates the theoretical nature of duo and the pedagogical motives behind its practice within forensics. In its current form, duo is an art form without an explanation.

There are two basic reasons why a conceptual justification of duo interpretation is essential. First, there is questionable value in developing an original art form without an explanation for the form chosen. Art is purposive, not random, and the quality of art is enhanced by the conceptual exploration of its premises. Second, duo is a practice peculiar to forensics, and forensics is a pedagogical activity. Teaching involves criteria of form; a performative activity cannot be effectively taught unless the nature and purpose of that activity is understood. Without any sort of conceptual justification there is a lack of distinct criteria by which to evaluate duo; teachers, students, and judges alike are left to their own idiosyncratic viewpoints. Clearly, the pedagogical value of duo is dubious, and by extension, the value of its practice in forensics is open to question.

It is not the purpose of this essay to condemn the current practice of duo within forensics. Rather, the intent here is to find some theoretical means of justifying duo in its current form. To determine a legitimate justification for duo this article examines current oral interpretation literature, Langer's concept of actual space, semiotics, and speech act theory.

DUO AND ORAL INTERPRETATION

As was noted above, there has never been a published rationale for the practice of duo interpretation. In the absence of any specific

---

*The National Forensic Journal, IV (Spring 1986), pp. 1-11. DAVID C. KLOPE is a Ph.D. Student and Graduate Assistant in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa, Iowa City 52242.
explanation for duo as a form, it is reasonable to investigate related literature for information regarding duo. The use of such literature, however, is immediately problematic. One does not have to search far to realize that prominent texts in oral interpretation distinguish between only two categories of form: solo and group performance. Any performance involving more than one reader is automatically categorized as group performance; i.e. readers theatre. Coger defined "Interpreter's Theatre" as a medium "in which two or more oral interpreters through their oral reading cause an audience to experience literature." Bacon described readers theatre as "the group reading of materials," and Lee and Gura referred to it as "a performance by a group of interpreters." Since the American Heritage Dictionary defines "group" as "two or more," it can be assumed that oral interpretation literature is consistent: the presence of two readers in performance is considered a group and hence readers theatre. Clearly, on a numerical basis, such a definition includes duo.

Although it is tempting to label duo as readers theatre, the current practice of duo prevents such a connection. The American Forensic Association (AFA) has defined duo as follows:

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. This is not an acting event. Thus, no costumes, props, lighting, etc., are to be used. Presentation is from the manuscript and not to each other. Maximum time limit is ten minutes including introduction.

If duo were considered as readers theatre, these rules would be inappropriate in the following areas: (1) the exclusive use of drama, (2) the insistence on the use of manuscript and offstage focus, (3) the prohibition of costumes, props, lighting, etc., and (4) the failure to mention the role of bodily movement. Oral interpretation literature does not recognize any of these strictures as legitimate. First, Coger insisted that readers theatre "is not limited to play form." Second,
Maclay implied that manuscripts are not absolutely necessary: "If readers theatre is to feature the text... it seems specious to reason that such a purpose will be accomplished simply by placing the manuscript of the text on the stage." Maclay also identified three types of focus available for readers theatre (offstage, onstage, and audience) as opposed to the one required by duo. Third, regarding theatrical conventions, Bacon stated that "Readers theatre may indeed use costumes and makeup...lights, scenery, props." Fourth, Coger and White spoke of the value of movement: "Movement, whether it be through space or merely a shifting of weight or a tightening of muscles, helps hold attention." There is clearly a significant degree of conceptual permissiveness given to readers theatre in performance. The imposition of the AFA rules upon any entity categorized as readers theatre would be ironic indeed, for it would strip such an entity of the elements that allowed it to be characterized as readers theatre. Readers theatre that was subjected to AFA duo rules would cease to be readers theatre.

Clearly, if the present practice of duo is to be maintained, the activity cannot be characterized as readers theatre. Further, duo cannot be justified from related literature: current oral interpretation texts contain no explanation or defense for duo as currently practiced. Such a defense will require the examination of other theoretical grounds. Before this investigation, however, two observations must be made.

First, this discussion will be prescriptive as well as descriptive. Certain trends have been emerging in the competitive practice of duo that are ill-advised, trends that have occurred because of the silence of official rules on certain issues. In the absence of rule criteria or conceptual justification for duo there has been little basis for condemning practices such as excessive movement. The discussion below will suggest appropriate alterations to such practices.

Second, although this article is attempting to focus upon duo as a distinct entity, it cannot accomplish this task without distinguishing duo from readers theatre and solo performance. The nature of duo can best be seen in contrast to the nature of the other two forms of oral interpretation. It will first be necessary to differentiate duo and sol from readers theatre, and then to distinguish duo from solo interpretation.

---

8 Maclay, pp. 17-22.
9 Bacon, p. 412.
DUO (SOLO) VS. READERS THEATRE

As a communicative form, the emphasis of oral interpretation has always been upon the audience perception of the interpretative event. Above all, the oral interpreter seeks to impact the audience's perceptions, to manipulate visual and oral channels in a uniquely performatively activity. Hence, it is appropriate to employ theoretical approaches to oral interpretation that address receiver-centered meaning ascription. Two such approaches can be found in Langer's concept of virtual space and Pierce's formulation of semiotics.

A useful means of illustrating Langer's concepts of virtual and actual space\(^{11}\) is through their application to theatre. In the theatre, an audience's perception of literal on-stage activity might be referred to as actual space. That is, the audience's perception is strictly literal and sensual, they see and hear only what is actually on-stage. At the point when the audience begins imagining things that are not literally on-stage is when those activities can be said to be occurring in virtual space. Elam noted that virtual space is "a domain which does not coincide with its actual physical limits, a mental construct on the part of the spectator from the visual clues he receives."\(^{12}\)

Applied to oral interpretation, one can say that virtual space is created when the literature is presented in such a way that an audience experiences the literature mentally by visualizing the scene and action that the readers describe. The key, however, is the lack of literalization. The literalization in the interpreter's body and voice of the content of the literature presented tends to pull the audience's perceptions on-stage and create actual space. That is, those items that are literalized no longer allow the interpretative participation of the audience's imagination, the meanings are thereby denoted, not connoted.

Although small, it is at this point that a distinction emerges between readers theatre and duo (and by extension, solo interpretation). In readers theatre the strategic use of on-stage focus is allowed when a given moment in the literature needs to be particularized. On-stage focus, however, creates actual space. At the moment of on-stage focus all action is also pulled on-stage; the interpreters, like actors in theatre, become literally identified with the physical activities of the characters they portray. Duo, however, as it is practiced under current rules, solely emphasizes virtual space. The requirements of offstage focus ensures that the readers


will not literalize any moment in the literature they present. The majority of the "action" in the presented literature, because it is not literalized, must occur in the minds of the audience. Hypothetically, actual space is impossible in the performance of duo.

Another means of distinguishing between readers theatre and duo (solo) is through understanding their nature as semiotic entities. Semiotics is essentially the study of the relationship between signs and signifiers. A sign is a material form that refers to some entity beyond itself, "a physical presence, referring back to something absent." The signifier is that entity referred to by the sign. For instance, the term 'cow' is a sign that signifies a four-legged animal. Similarly, an individual who shakes a clenched fist at another is issuing a sign that signifies hatred and possible violence. O'Sullivan et al. have observed that a sign "can have a variety of forms, such as words, gestures, photographs, or architectural features." In essence, then, signs are symbols, and the discipline of semiotics is concerned with the generation of meaning through symbol systems.

Semiotics has expanded enormously in the past twenty years, and one area in which it has been employed profitably is theatre criticism. Kowzan first noted that "everything is a sign in a theatrical presentation." In discussing the semiotization of all theatre objects, Elam asserted that "the very fact of their appearance on-stage suppresses the practical function of phenomena in favor of a symbolic or signifying role." For instance, Eco described the placing of an actual drunk individual before an audience and claimed that as soon as this individual was shown to the audience that "the drunken man has lost his original nature of a real body among real bodies ... he has become a semiotic device, he is now a sign."

Semiotics can also provide an insightful conceptual framework for the understanding of oral interpretation. Actually, a reader in front of an audience cannot avoid being a set of signs. The interpreter who walks up to perform is "real" until the script is opened. Like Eco's drunk, the reader in performance ceases to be completely a real body among real bodies; the interpreter is a set of signs for the signified literary text.

---

15 As cited in Elam, p. 20.
16 Elam, p. 21.
17 Eco, p. 110.
Central to the application of semiotics to oral interpretation is an understanding of sign types. Probably the most extensive typology of signs was developed by C.S. Pierce, who eventually differentiated among ten trichotomies and sixty-six classes of signs. For the present analysis Pierce's best known trichotomy is most appropriate: symbol, icon, and index. The latter two types, for reasons that cannot be developed in this essay, are most relevant to oral interpretation and will be discussed in detail.

An index is a sign that is causally connected to its object, either physically or through contiguity. Pierce stated that "an index is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that object." Two examples of indexes would be the rolling gait of a sailor that indicates his profession, or a knock on the door that indicates that someone is outside it.

The icon is best associated with similitude—the sign suggests the signified because of physical or conceptual resemblance. The icon is the broadest category of sign. Pierce further divided the icon into subclasses of image, diagram, and metaphor, subclasses distinguished by the degree of similarity between sign and signifier. An image is intended to be a direct and complete representation of the signified, such as a flag in a theatrical play that represents any given flag. In contrast, the diagram has only a general structural resemblance to its object; a circle, for instance, drawn to represent a wheel. The metaphor exists in the near absence of resemblance between sign and signified, when the similarity is "simply asserted rather than apparent, as in the case of an empty stage which becomes, for the audience, a battlefield."

Pierce's trichotomy is most useful for attempting to isolate the performatory nature of duo and solo interpretation in contrast to that of readers theatre. At the outset, however, it must be understood that no one form of oral interpretation can be categorized exclusively as one or another type of sign. In varying degrees, duo, solo, and readers theatre operate as both index and icon. The proper means of viewing their function is by means of a continuum, with each performatory type involving differing degrees of sign types.

The sign type that most clearly describes the function of oral interpretation in general is the icon. Readers theatre, duo, and solo are iconic, but emphasize different subclasses. Readers theatre, for instance, allows some iconic image creation. On occasion the reader is allowed to give direct representation of a character (i.e. actual space). The audience is thereby asked to view the interpere-
ter's visual and oral image (i.e. cues) as the literal representation of the character.

In contrast to readers theatre's permissiveness, duo should discourage iconic image creation whenever possible. The offstage focus rule suggests that duo is oriented towards the creation of virtual space, as the interpreters are prevented from literalizing any moment in the script. Thus, interpreters should be discouraged from attempting to completely represent their characters.

The subclass of icon that best describes the goal and function of readers theatre is the iconic diagram. In contemporary readers theatre, presentations employ blocking to give an audience general structural clues to form mental pictures of the literature presented. Stage movement can suggest such items as the physical environment of a scene. Hence, a direct representation of scene is not provided and the audience is allowed to imaginatively fill in the gaps through the structural resemblance of the stage picture to the actual scene.

To a degree, duo interpreters cannot avoid diagrammatic representation. The traditional taboo against stage movement in duo requires the interpreters to remain standing side by side and to engage in a minimum of gesture. Admittedly, this "taboo" is sorely tried in practice, as interpreters will often include as much movement as they imagine their judges will allow. Perhaps, in an effort to more clearly distinguish readers theatre from duo, an explicit prohibition against movement should be included in official forensic rules. Interpreters would thereby be prevented from diagrammatically demonstrating scene or character relationships through movement.

The traditional, often unwritten, prohibition against movement in duo suggests that the proper emphasis of duo is upon the iconic metaphor. The relationship between sign and signified, between the interpreters and the scene they represent, is asserted rather than apparent. The given stage picture in duo, two interpreters standing side by side, can, depending on the literature, equally represent two characters at a restaurant, on a battlefield, or on the Himalayan mountain K2. The relationship between the two interpreters and the scene in the presented literature is asserted, the performance occurs almost entirely in virtual space, and the audience is allowed to fill in the gaps with their imagination. In other words, the audience is allowed to decide for themselves the means by which the sign (interpreter's visual and vocal cues) should be connected with the signified (literature/scene). In no instance should the interpreters attempt to connect the sign and signifier with anything but the barest of gesture.
Considered as icons, then, duo emphasizes metaphor but allows a slight amount of diagram, while readers theatre focuses upon diagram and allows the creation of some literalizing image. In addition to the icon, the index sign type can also allow some further distinction between duo (solo) and readers theatre. The difference, again, is one of degree, not exclusion.

As was noted above, readers theatre occasionally allows the literalization of onstage events, i.e. the creation of image and actual space. In the creation of image interpreters are sometimes allowed to directly represent characters through movement, gesture, and stance. In such circumstances, the use of movement is an indexical function. It was noted previously that the rolling gait of a sailor was an indexical sign of his profession. In other words, the sailor's profession directly caused his walking style, so that an observer could guess his profession (signified) from his gait (sign). In the same way, the requirements of a character demand certain types of movement from a readers theatre performer, thus making the performer's body and movement a sign of the signified character. A twenty-one year old performer, for instance, who portrays a ninety-one year old, becomes an index of that character through necessarily altered movement. This indexical function remains the same even if the portrayal is diagrammatic rather than literal.

Not only does a specific indexical function act to create actual space, but the degree of actual space increases with the incremental rise in the number of separate communication channels employed indexically. For example, the literal representation of a character's voice in an oral interpretation performance is not likely to significantly alter the status of virtual space evoked by the performance. If the reader then adds literal movement and gesture (or other interpreter-produced channels), however, the audience will begin to connect the interpreter/sign more literally with the character/signified. The addition of each indexical function fleshes out the essence of the character on-stage; each function drastically reduces the interpretative interaction of the audience by essentially closing off the meaning of the index, insisting in effect that the index has only one meaning.

Clearly, then, the nature of the indexical function requires that duo (solo) be more strictly regulated than readers theatre if duo as a form is to remain distinct. Readers theatre is allowed more literalization, and hence more indices. Duo, however, must limit the number of interpreter-produced channels that serve indexical functions if it is to fulfill its goal of producing virtual space in performance. A degree of indexicality is obviously required in the voice, as differing characters may require voice adjustments by the
readers. Minor movement and gesture may also be appropriate in limited instances. In the interests of virtual space and metaphoric representation, however, the number of different interpreter-produced communicative channels employed in the performance of duo should be kept to a minimum.

DUO VS. SOLO

Up to this point an attempt has been made to suggest that readers theatre and duo (solo) should be considered as occupying different positions on a semiotic continuum. Solo interpretation has been considered together with duo because solo typically emphasizes virtual space and metaphoric representation in the same manner as duo. Clearly, however, duo and solo are practiced separately and considered to be relatively distinct activities. It is appropriate to investigate, therefore, whether there are conceptual and pragmatic reasons for distinguishing between duo and solo interpretation. The following discussion will seek to accomplish two tasks: (1) to argue that speech act theory can be applied to the study of oral interpretation, and (2) to demonstrate that speech act theory provides a useful means of viewing the distinctions between duo and solo interpretation.

One of the most obvious, and therefore one of the most overlooked, aspects of oral interpretation is that it employs language in its performance. Therefore, one potentially valuable way to examine oral interpretation-in-performance is to employ concepts revolving around the examination of language-in-use. It is reasonable to suppose that the language within oral interpretation-in-performance, especially that involving character interaction, might function in similar fashion to language employed in interaction.

One useful means of viewing all types of theatrical/interpretative performance is through speech act theory. One of the early proponents of the theory, Austin, claimed that the construct was founded on the notion that language is a means of social action. Utterances, according to Austin, are not simply statements but are means of doing things. In any given utterance, two primary types of action may be present: (1) the illocutionary act, that act performed in the process of saying something, such as issuing an order or asking a question, and (2) the perlocutionary act, an act performed by means of saying something, the effect that utterance has upon a listener.

Theatre is a clear arena in which to view language action, in its manifestation within dramatic dialogue. Elam noted that "Dra-

matic discourse is a network of complementary and conflicting illocutions and perlocutions." Ohmann further claimed that "in a play the action rides on a train of illocutions . . . movement of the characters and changes in their relations to one another with the social world of the play appear most clearly in their illocutionary acts." Dialogue, then, does not simply describe or represent the action in a play; dialogue constitutes action, it is action.

Such a perspective on dramatic dialogue in terms of speech act theory provides an indication of the nature of duo. As duo in practice allows only dialogue, it can be argued that the primary emphasis in duo is upon action, the portrayal of two characters acting upon one another through language. Further, in duo the creation of virtual space must occur through the agency of language action, not description. The focus of dialogue is upon interaction, and although some descriptive material may be present in the lines, a sense of context is created for the audience through the literary characters' interaction with their environment in terms of their relation to each other. That is, context exists in duo as a strategic resource for two characters attempting to act upon one another, and the audience only perceives context through a perceptual screen formed by this interaction. Thus, virtual space is evoked through action.

Speech act theory is a useful means of viewing how duo functions, but is does not provide an independent basis for distinguishing between duo and solo. That is, the above action function of duo is potentially possible within solo interpretation, as the practice of solo within forensics allows the use of dramatic dialogue. If speech act theory is combined with some pragmatic considerations, however, a useful prescriptive distinction between duo and solo interpretation can be formed.

If the legitimacy of emphasizing literary dialogue in performance is granted, then it can be argued that, pragmatically, two interpreters present dialogue better than one. Anyone who has viewed the "ping-pong match" effect of a single reader attempting to maintain two separate focal points in the presentation of dialogue will recognize the confusion that these presentations can produce. Such a solo performance is particularly bewildering when the lines of dialogue are short and the character exchange rapid; the interpreter and the audience become quickly confused as to which character is speaking at any given moment. In duo, however, with one interpreter assigned to each character, this confusion is alleviated. The emphasis is still upon virtual space, but the visual

---

22 Elam, p. 159.
cues are extended just enough (i.e. to two individuals) to ensure comprehension.

If speech act theory and the utilitarian perspective argued above are considered together, then it is reasonable to suggest that, within, forensics, the performance of dialogue should be limited to duo, allowing solo interpreters who desire to present dramatic material to use monologues. Such a regulation would allow duo exclusive right to emphasize what its numerical form and prescribed material allows it to do best: the nonproblematic presentation of two characters engaged in language action. At the least, the prescribed use of two readers suggests that such a form should accomplish a different task than a form that calls for a single reader. Actually, the single interpreter, who necessarily has a limited number of communicative channels at his/her disposal, is better situated for the creation of virtual space than either readers theatre or duo. The single interpreter, thorough the presentation of narrative material that emphasizes character portrayal and/or scene creation, can allow the audience the greatest amount of imaginative interaction with the literature.

CONCLUSION

Overall, it is clear that there are conceptual reasons for treating duo as an independent entity. Duo can be viewed on a semiotic continuum resembling solo interpretation in function more than readers theatre, a function that is oriented towards the creation of virtual space. The use of dialogue in duo, however, results in a greater emphasis upon language action than connotation, making its production of virtual space slightly less than solo interpretation. Thus, a distinction in practice can be made between duo and solo, suggesting that the difference between one and two readers is an adequate basis for somewhat different goals for the two forms.

It must be admitted that this attempt to construct independent ground for duo is incomplete, and that the lines between duo, solo, and readers theatre is still somewhat blurred. It is also true that precise boundaries cannot and should not be formed if artistic independence is to be maintained. Nevertheless, the need for conceptual justification for an activity remains. It is essential to have a purpose for engaging in a unique performative form, especially when one is engaged in a pedagogically oriented activity such as forensics. Without theoretical understanding of forms there is no clear vision of what is being taught through an activity. If duo interpretation as a forensic activity is to maintain artistic and pedagogical integrity, continued attempts must be made towards conceptual justification for the practice of duo interpretation.