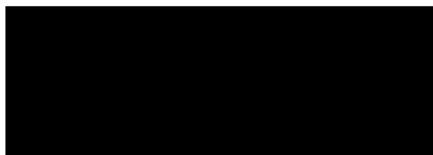


The Eye Contact Continuum in Interpretative Reading

Peter B. Orlik



Of all the aspects of the oral interpretation process, the subject of eye contact is perhaps the most perplexing to students and authority alike. The great variety of approaches to eye contact now being taught seem to indicate that, while there is no universal standard to which the novice can confidently repair, it is inevitable that one particular style will be forcibly draped upon him by some text or teacher. Later, a new text or a new teacher might very well demand a new cloak. To what extent might the student be required to adapt? In some cases, to a very great degree indeed.

For today, the continuum ranges from the near-continuous direct eye contact of the ultra-intense "communicative readers" to the conservative position held by Skinner and others which advocates the complete abandonment of direct eye contact during the actual reading performance.

The *University of Tulsa's* Ben Graf Henneke is representative of this former position. Professor Henneke maintains that if the salesman, speaker, and television performer must look directly at their listeners, so too should the interpretative reader. "The audience looks where you look except when you are looking at them; then they look back at you," says Henneke¹. Thus, any "back wall visualization" would only cause confusion in the minds of the audience and might even motivate some of them to turn around to see what you are looking at. According to Henneke, one must follow his manuscript until he is certain what to say—then look at the audience until that phrase or group of phrases is completed.²

A similar and perhaps more radical stand is taken by McBurney and Wrage who not only want the reader to keep up a sustained eye contact with his listeners but also ask that he:

Watch their reactions. Do they seem to be getting the point? Do they appear to be reacting to the force or subtleties of the writer's message? Do they show signs of feeling in with the mood of your selection? Keep in touch with your listeners and you will find that their reactions are a test of and a stimulus to your efforts.³

"Look up as much as you can," say McBurney and Wrage. "Establish a line of communication with your audience through eye contact and physical directness."⁴

While still supporting the idea of direct eye contact, a number of other authorities follow a less rigid code. They believe that the amount of direct eye contact which the reader uses is entirely or almost entirely predicated on the requirements of the particular material to be read. "The selection must be the predominant factor in deciding whether the reader will establish a direct or indirect relationship

with his audience," say Armstrong and Brandes.⁵ Browning's "How Do I Love Thee?" for example, calls for a minimum of direct eye contact because, "Lovers speak their lines in privacy, not in public."⁶

Another reason to avoid direct eye contact in this selection is, according to Armstrong and Brandes, its *familiarity*.

Many persons will have established previous associations with the selection which they would prefer to rekindle, instead of lighting a fire under a new association. The reader's goal therefore, is to stimulate the audience so that it can re-create its former images and live in its memories and its imagination.⁷ Nevertheless, the two authors are convinced that "the number of selections which profit from direct eye contact far outnumber those with which it is questionable."⁸

Lawrence H. Mouat of *San Jose State University* is another writer who believes that the selection determines the amount of direct eye contact between reader and audience. He also uses the Browning poem to re-emphasize that reflective, intimate material of "the first voice" does not call for direct eye contact. Unlike Armstrong and Brandes however, Mouat does not believe that situations requiring direct eye contact "far outnumber" those that do not. In fact, Mouat is quite content to put the matter this way:

Look at your audience when it is helpful to do so. Look away from them or past them when it seems better that way.⁹

A similarly tolerant attitude is expressed by *Denison University's* Lionel Crocker who believes that both methods have validity, the correct one for a given situation being determined solely by the material. To Crocker, the important thing is not that the eye look at a particular area, but that its gaze remains steady:

In reading materials that call for audience contact, when you look up from the book see someone in the audience and stay with that individual until you have lodged the idea home . . . If you are reading prose or poetry that does not call for direct eye contact with the immediate audience, look up and out and keep the eyes focused so that the audience will sense your attempt to interpret the meaning of the passage. Concentrate! A restless, shifting of the eyes shows a lack of following through on the idea. Hold the idea. Pause with the eyes.¹⁰

Smith and Linn's *Skill in Reading Aloud* also promotes this dichotomy of style. These two authorities are of the opinion that direct eye contact in personal material (that which uses "you" "thee" etc.) could only serve to embarrass the audience. In these situations therefore, the reader should direct his eyes "to the horizon". "You must seem to be seeing with your 'mind's eye' not with a physical focus"¹¹.

This same term, "mind's eye", crops up in an earlier book by Gertrude Johnson who uses it to describe the "suggestive realm of the audience":

. . . the suggestive realm wherein we establish scene, character, and all pertaining to the impression, as seen in our mind's eye, and in which we lead hearers to see with their mind's eyes, always directing them suggestively, never literally, taking care indeed, that no literal actions, gestures, or movements

shall interfere with the imaginative process of the audience . . . If our material is direct discourse, we address audiences with direct eye contacts; if it is subjective, we are not under this necessity.¹²

Note especially this last phrase which seems to indicate that Johnson felt direct eye contact in the interpretative reading process to be something of a burden which you are "under" when presenting direct discourse while subjective material seemingly liberates you from "this necessity".

Professor Johnson's position was dynamically mirrored, and even extended by her distinguished pupil, E. Ray Skinner, who said bluntly:

You don't look at the audience when you want to see the village.¹³

Dr. Skinner firmly believed that direct eye contact had no place in the oral interpretation process. In his lectures, he constantly stressed the fact that "your eye is the most expressive part of you . . . The audience must be able to see your eyes. They must be able to see that you are imaging . . . Unfocus your eyes to show the audience you are imaging the scene and to let you yourself image it better . . . Never let things in the room stand for things in the reading . . . Look slightly above the heads of the audience and actually see the scene as your author has seen it."¹⁴

We have come a long way from Henneke's position. But I believe it was well worth the journey, for it seems, to this writer at least, that it is the job of the interpretative reader to have adapted to his audience *before* he steps to the lectern to read. Through the careful selection and practice of the material to be read, the wise interpreter will have already taken into account the probable interests and tastes of his listeners. If the reader must wait until the performance is in progress to analyse his audience, and then change his whole approach to a literary selection to meet the real or imagined reactions of some members of that audience, how can it possibly be imagined that a well-fashioned art form will be the result? In essence, this is like expecting the orchestral conductor to wave off the tympani at the climax of *Alexander Nevsky* because he saw that some members of the audience were adversely affected by the "din".

Both the conductor and the reader are dealing with, if you will, "pre-packaged" forms of art which, although they may be interpreted any of a number of ways, cannot be changed on the spot merely to appease an inhabitant of the balcony. If the selection does not appeal to the audience, it should not have been programmed in the first place.

Likewise, both the reader and the conductor are, at the moment of performance, involved in the arduous and terribly taxing job of re-creating another artist's *pulse*. The concentration this requires could only be adversely affected by frequent visual excursions into the audience to see how the house is taking it. As Charlotte Lee so aptly states:

A direct meeting of eyes can sometimes throw the interpreter off stride for a moment and break his concentration. It is simpler and safer to visualise the characters addressed as somewhere toward the back of the room, only a few inches above the heads of the audience.¹⁵

Though Lee applies her statement only to "characters" it seems logical that

a scene, to be visualised (imaged) properly, must demand and expend an equal degree of concentration. Indeed, a scene might demand *more* because a character gives off an immediate aura, a definite personality to the reader. But a scene? A scene demands a concentration of breadth as well as of depth. A slow sweep of one's audience may uncover faces like those of the imagined characters but it will not provide the model for that woodland scene, or that castle rampart, or that Easter pageant.

If you saw the audience and not the scene, of what real benefit is it to them? They know where they are. But if you've chosen your material carefully and rehearsed it diligently, they'd rather be "out there" with you!

REFERENCES

- ¹ Ben Graf Henneke, *Reading Aloud Effectively* (New York, Rinehart and Co., 1954), p. 143.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ James H. McBurney and Ernest J. Wrage, *Guide to Good Speech* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1955), p. 311.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- ⁵ Chloe Armstrong and Paul D. Brandes, *The Oral Interpretation of Literature* (New York, McGraw-Hill Co., 1963), pp. 149-150.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- ⁹ Lawrence H. Mouat, *Reading Literature Aloud*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 37.
- ¹⁰ Lionel Crocker, *Interpretative Speech* (New York, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1952), p. 53.
- ¹¹ Joseph F. Smith and James R. Linn, *Skill in Reading Aloud* (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 294.
- ¹² Gertrude E. Johnson, "Impersonation, a Necessary Technique", in *Studies in the Art of Interpretation* (New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., 1940), pp. 128-129.
- ¹³ E. Ray Skinner, noted by Peter Orlik (*Wayne State U.*), July, 1964.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Charlotte I. Lee, *Oral Interpretation*, Third Edition (Boston, Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1965), p. 332.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Armstrong, Chloe, and Brandes, Paul D., *The Oral Interpretation of Literature*, New York, McGraw-Hill Co., 1963.
2. Crocker, Lionel *Interpretative Speech*, New York, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1952.
3. Henneke, Ben Graff, *Reading Aloud Effectively*, New York, Rinehart and Co., 1954.
4. Johnson, Gertrude E., "Impersonation, a Necessary Technique", in *Studies in the Art of Interpretation*, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., 1940.
5. Lee, Charlotte I., *Oral Interpretation*—Third Edition, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1965.
6. McBurney, James H., and Wrage, Ernest J., *Guide to Good Speech*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1955.
7. Mouat, Lawrence H., *Reading Literature Aloud*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1962.
8. Skinner, E. Ray, noted by Peter Orlik, Wayne State University, July, 1964.
9. Smith, Joseph F., and Linn, James R.; *Skill in Reading Aloud*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1960.

PETER B. ORLIK is Instructor of Speech at Wayne State University, Detroit.