WARRENSBURG, Mo. | Associate U.S. Justice Antonin Scalia delivered a withering and practiced critique of modern constitutional interpretation Tuesday during an evening address at the University of Central Missouri.

Scalia, the second-most senior justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, focused particularly on the notion of a “living Constitution” that evolves as society “matures.”

“The Constitution does not change,” Scalia said. “It means today what it meant when it first was written. … It does not morph.”

Scalia appeared before a friendly crowd of about 1,300 as part of the university’s Julius J. Oppenheimer Lecture Series.

Echoing themes he fleshed out more than 10 years ago in his book A Matter of Interpretation and in hundreds of opinions and dissents, Scalia said judges who read more into the Constitution than actually was written there could make the document less capable of protecting citizens from an unjust majority. “It will produce what the society at the time likes,” Scalia said. “Sometimes it will grant some rights. Other times it will take some away.”

He said his proudest moment on the court came in 2004 when he wrote an opinion that fully restored the rights of criminal defendants to face their accusers in court, rather than through some sort of testimonial statement presented to jurors.

That right of confrontation, he said, had been eroded over the years and had threatened a defendant’s right to trial by jury.

Scalia described himself as an “originalist” who went to the text of the Constitution to find what was there and what wasn’t.

“The Constitution is not a living organism,” Scalia said. “It’s a legal document that says some things and doesn’t say others.”

He drew applause when he acknowledged to the crowd that he was a social conservative but then took pains to describe how his method of constitutional interpretation can sometimes lead him to decisions opposite from his political convictions.

“I ought to be the pinup of the criminal defense bar because I’ve written opinions to defend the rights of the accused,” Scalia said.

Scalia’s humor punctuated the evening, particularly during a question-and-answer session in which he was asked with which Supreme Court member, living or dead, he would like to have dinner. “I have dinner with Ruth (Bader Ginsberg) once a year, and I certainly wouldn’t want to have dinner with a dead man,” Scalia said.

Scalia has been seen as a strong protector of rights that are explicitly defined in the Constitution. He has voted, for example, to strike down laws restricting activities at each end of the conventional political spectrum, flag-burning on the one hand and cross-burning on the other.

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