

Questioning ventriloquism

John A. Barnden^a

^a School of Computer Science, The University of Birmingham, UK, j.a.barnden@cs.bham.ac.uk.

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Abstract. Cooren (2014) argues that a ventriloquism metaphor for communication can provide a unified perspective on seven traditions in the study of communication. This Discussion Note does not argue for or against the idea that a suitably deployed and motivated ventriloquism metaphor can do this. Instead, the Note expresses some concerns about whether Cooren does suitably deploy, motivate, and support ventriloquism as a metaphor for communication. The concerns are about whether ventriloquism as opposed to a simpler personification-based view should be used, and whether two different notions of ventriloquism are being adequately considered. I also point to a complication that should be embraced in how one should analyse back-ventriloquism, i.e., people being ventriloquized by their own dummies, as suggested by Cooren. None of the concerns are fatal to Cooren's enterprise, but rather point to the need for a more refined untangling of issues.

Keywords: fiction-based models, language pragmatics, metaphor, ventriloquism

This discussion note responds to a particular aspect of the thought-provoking paper by Cooren (2014). Cooren responds to "Craig's (1999) call for a dialogue between what he identified as the seven traditions in the study of communication" (Cooren 2014: 1). Cooren's response is to propose that communication be viewed as involving "ventriloquism", using this term in a metaphorical sense. The ventriloqual view is claimed to help us to analyze what a communicative situation "requires, demands or requests". (Following Cooren, we should note the metaphorically used speech-describing notions of "demanding" and "requesting" here.) Cooren discusses how his ventriloqual view explicates in a unified way the seven traditions that Craig (1999) identified.

I will not be discussing whether or not a suitably deployed and motivated ventriloquism metaphor for communication can provide a unified way of addressing those seven traditions.

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Rather, I have some concerns about whether Cooren does, in fact, suitably deploy and motivate ventriloquism as a metaphor for communication.

My first worry is whether Cooren leaps too readily to ventriloquism as a metaphor, as opposed to considering other metaphors that might be used. The ventriloquism metaphor may be too rich and special for many normal purposes. Consider the situation that Cooren discusses of Joseph referring to his student-paper marking workload as a reason for not joining Kathy and others for dinner. Cooren suggests that we can [metaphorically] describe this as Joseph *making the workload say* that he should decline the invitation. Cooren uses this and other cases to motivate the ventriloquism metaphor. I will assume that the real-world ventriloquism scenario that Cooren has in mind throughout his paper is of a ventriloquist doing a stage performance with a dummy (or “figure”) that looks a bit like a person, and the ventriloquist is making it look and sound as though speech is coming out of the dummy’s mouth. Thus, in viewing Joseph’s reference to his marking workload as ventriloquism, we are to imagine a metaphorical source scenario in which Joseph is a ventriloquist, the workload is the ventriloquist’s dummy, and the ventriloquist is making it look as though the dummy is telling Joseph to decline the invitation.¹ In this scenario, Kathy is, I take it, a member of the audience watching the stage performance. Now, at first sight we may seem to have metaphorically captured, in an appealing and vivid way, Joseph’s communication to Kathy. To unpack the intended metaphor a little, I presume that we are to consider it to be analysed in something like the following way. The influence of the workload on Joseph is metaphorically cast as the spoken command uttered by the dummy. But, at the same time, the fact that the influence is not really created by the workload itself, but is rather a product of Joseph’s own attitude to the workload, is metaphorically cast as Joseph *causing* the dummy to speak: the dummy is not speaking through its own independent agency. And Joseph is causing the dummy to speak because he wishes the audience to hear what it “says”. That is, in the target scenario, Joseph wishes to draw attention to the influence of the workload through his communicative action.

The problem is that we are in danger of sliding over a crucial distinction here in the notion of speaking (between genuinely speaking and merely uttering speech sounds), and missing the actual point of a ventriloquism stage performance. The ventriloquist does not cause the dummy to *speak* but only *causes it to merely appear to speak*, in such a way that the audience knows very well that the dummy is not actually speaking (i.e., the dummy is not a sentient being forming utterances through its own cognitive powers, and is not even a sentient forming utterances because of being forced to do so by the ventriloquist). In other words, the ventriloquist deliberately causes a *transparent pretence* or *transparent fiction* that the dummy is speaking: the ventriloquist is just pretending that the dummy is speaking, the audience realizes that he/she is pretending, and the ventriloquist wants them to realize this. When the dummy appears to command the ventriloquist to do something, there is in fact, and crucially, no such command (the command is only inside the pretence/fiction), there is therefore no causing of the dummy to genuinely utter any command, and the audience knows all this. Thus, ventriloquist-making-dummy-speak is neither something that actually happens

¹ I use the term *target scenario* for a situation that is actually being metaphorically described—in our example the actual communication Joseph is engaging in. The target scenario is metaphorically cast as being a *metaphorical source scenario*—in our example a ventriloquism situation.

in the performance outside the fiction (because in reality the ventriloquist is merely making the dummy appear to speak) *nor* something that happens within the fiction created in the performance (because no-one is making the dummy do anything at all, within that fiction; all we have within the fiction is two people talking to each other).

So, if we really were to try, as supposed above, to view the marking workload as having an influence on Joseph (though with Joseph himself being the cause of that influence) as the dummy commanding Joseph to do something (though with Joseph himself causing that command) we must fail. In the metaphorical source scenario there is no command or causing-to-command to work with. There is only a command within the fiction that is created by the ventriloquist (this creation being part of the metaphorical source scenario), and there is no causing-to-command at any level.

There is a communicative situation that would actually be better thought of as being described by our metaphorical source scenario than the straightforward one of someone using a marking workload as a sincere reason to decline an invitation. The alternative situation is where Joseph is transparently pretending that the marking workload influences him to decline the invitation (when in fact it doesn't), i.e. pretending it with the intention that Kathy realizes that he is so pretending. I would submit that even if people sometimes act this way, it is a special circumstance, and is sharply distinct from the straightforward situation mentioned of using the workload as a sincere reason.

A better metaphorical analysis for the straightforward situation might simply be an exercise in personification metaphor, where the workload is metaphorically cast as a person who is verbally commanding Joseph (or whomever) to decline the invitation. We then metaphorically cast Joseph's reference to the workload as his drawing attention to the fact that he is being verbally commanded by that person (and *not* by a dummy). This metaphorical analysis does not yet capture the idea that it is Joseph himself who somehow causes the influence the workload has on him. But this extra element could be added by supposing that Joseph has somehow caused or led the workload-person to make the command. After all, in real life people have ways of leading other real people into saying things.

Cooren might alternatively claim that the Joseph communication scenario is not being metaphorically viewed in terms of the ventriloquism scenario itself, but rather in terms of the fiction mentioned above that the latter scenario includes, namely the fiction that the dummy is issuing a command to Joseph. But now it is not clear why one needs the ventriloquism scenario at all: one might as well have used that fictional situation as the metaphorical source scenario, bypassing the ventriloquism wrapping entirely. This would be tantamount to the personification-based analysis in the previous paragraph. Or, if one wanted to preserve the idea that Joseph is himself creating the fiction, this can be achieved merely by casting Joseph as a story-teller of some sort. There is no need to propose a ventriloquism scenario particularly—it is needlessly special and rich for the purpose of portraying a communicative situation like our straightforward one above, and there are simpler speech-based metaphors available. The ventriloquism metaphor would only be needed for communicative situations of special sorts.

The above discussion has been purely about how we as theorists might metaphorically view Joseph's communication to Kathy. It has not of itself mentioned or implied any particular metaphorical view that Joseph or Kathy themselves might have of the situation. I

suggest if we do bring in discourse-participants' own views we are in danger of getting a misleading strengthening of the impression that ventriloquism is normally the appropriate analysis. It seems reasonable to me to suppose that the following could be the case:

- (1) Joseph is trying to influence Kathy into metaphorically thinking of the marking workload as talking to him, telling him to decline the invitation.

One might easily slip into thinking that the situation described literally by (1) can be described metaphorically as Joseph being a ventriloquist who is trying to make it look to Kathy that the dummy (standing for the marking workload) is telling him to decline the invitation. But, much as before, this purported metaphorical view of situation (1) doesn't really describe *that* situation but instead the following rather special situation:

- (2) Joseph is trying to influence Kathy into metaphorically thinking of him *as transparently pretending that* the marking workload is telling him to decline the invitation.

I have two further concerns. One is that Cooren's paper does not distinguish between two ways the term ventriloquism is used in common parlance. It can refer either to a genuinely misleading phenomenon or to a non-misleading, entertaining phenomenon. The genuinely misleading one is where the ventriloquist makes it sound as though a voice is coming from somewhere else, e.g. the corner of a room, and hearers are really misled into thinking it is coming from there, and thus that there is some sort of sentient agent there. The non-misleading one is the stage-performance case, where the audience realizes that the sound is not really coming from the dummy. Clearly, Cooren tries to deploy the latter. However, the genuinely misleading sense fits better as a metaphorical analysis of at least some situations. We could metaphorically describe, say, Joseph successfully and deceptively blaming a marking workload for his inability to go out to dinner (when in fact it is a choice made for other reasons) as an act of ventriloquizing in the *genuinely misleading* sense. In the metaphorical source scenario Kathy comes to believe that the workload is commanding Joseph not to go. Correspondingly, in the target scenario Kathy comes to believe that the workload is to blame for Joseph's inability.

The other concern is about Cooren's suggestion that people are not only ventriloquists but are also ventriloquized by the dummies that they set up—made to say things *by* marking workloads, impulses to politeness, etc. For instance, on p.6 Cooren says that Joseph and Kathy “are both depicted as ventriloquizing these figures [dummies] and as ventriloquized by them ... because these figures are ... staged as *animating* Joseph and Kathy, that is, making them say things too” (emphasis is in original). Let me call this *back-ventriloquism*. While it is a thought-provoking idea, analogues of the above concerns extend also to it, of course—in brief, there is often or usually no reason to think that something is creating a *transparent pretence* that Joseph and Kathy are saying what they are saying.

But there is a special but quite straightforward case where the genuinely-misleading sense of ventriloquism would provide an appropriate analysis. Suppose that Joseph is saying something apparently of his own volition, but, unbeknownst to the people he is talking to, he is led to say it by something X (a pile of marking or whatever). This could be

metaphorically cast as X being a genuinely-misleading ventriloquist who is making it look as though Joseph is saying what he is saying.

But, putting such worries aside, let us assume that a back-ventriloquism scenario, where both the back-ventriloquism itself and the ventriloquism by Joseph is of Cooren's non-misleading sort, indeed provides a reasonable metaphorical view in at least some situations. There is then an interesting, necessary technical qualification. Imagine a real, stage ventriloquist, Ventnor, with his dummy, Dumas. Ventnor might, as part of his performance, make it look as though Dumas is making him, Ventnor, talk as if he were a dummy. My observation is that what we have here is a *fiction within a fiction*—a story within a story. The outer, standard fiction is that of Dumas being an ordinary person who is talking to the ordinary person Ventnor. Within that story, we have a story that Dumas is now a ventriloquist and Ventnor is now a dummy. It is not just a matter of adding extra detail to the standard story.

When now the overall scenario about this stage ventriloquist Ventnor is used as a metaphorical source scenario S to describe an act of communication, the fiction-within-a-fiction that has just been explained is itself embedded within S. So there are three levels: S as a whole, containing a ventriloquist Ventnor and a dummy Dumas; nested within that, the standard fiction that Dumas is a person talking to Ventnor; and nested within that; the further fiction that Dumas-the-person is more specially a ventriloquist and Ventnor is his dummy. The back-ventriloquism is not ventriloquism at either of the outer two levels but only by Dumas at that third, innermost, level.

In Barnden (2015) and Barnden (in press), I discuss a theoretical framework and implemented computer program for metaphor processing called ATT-Meta. This framework is pretence/fiction-based and is related to fiction-based approaches to metaphor in philosophy such as by Walton (2004). In ATT-Meta, a metaphorical source scenario is a form of fiction or pretence. So what we have in the case of the back-ventriloquism metaphor is three levels of pretence/fiction: the overall metaphorical source scenario and the fiction-within-a-fiction nested within it.

Such nesting of fictions arises also in ATT-Meta as the way for a hearer to process chained metaphor, or serially compounded or serially mixed metaphor as I prefer to call it. In ATT-Meta, the serial compounding of metaphor is handled by means of the nesting of pretences/fictions, as explained in Barnden (in press), building on Lee & Barnden (2001). Essentially, if A is metaphorically viewed as B and B is metaphorically viewed as C, then there is a fiction in which A is B, and nested within that a fiction that B is C. This is two levels of fiction. Three levels would arise from a further act of metaphorically viewing C as D, giving rise to an innermost fiction in which C is D.

To conclude, I find Cooren's approach stimulating and intriguing, and am prepared to believe that if suitably deployed it could help in the aim of bringing together the various traditions of communication theory that he discusses. However, there are problems of fine-grained metaphor analysis and motivation that need to be addressed. The problems centre on simpler speech-based metaphors being available and being more appropriate than ventriloquism in many (perhaps most) cases, and on the point that even when ventriloquism is the appropriate metaphor, it is often the genuinely-misleading sort of ventriloquism rather than the non-misleading, staged entertainment sort that should arguably be brought in.

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