

Ventriloquism as a matter for discourse analysis

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Paper received: 20 December 2015

Published online: 4 March 2016

DOI: 10.31885/lud.2.1.244

Abstract. As a discourse analyst, I take François Cooren's compelling reconstruction of communication theory as ventriloquism as a universe in which the world speaks through us and by our speaking of it, as an invitation to new noticings, new conversations, new questions for analysis (of discourse; interaction; communication). In this discussion note, I stage an inter-action between Cooren's *ventriloqual* universe and the concepts of *affect*, *orders of indexicality* and *polycentricity* that animate the work of discourse scholars Rick Iedema and Jan Blommaert. In doing so, I consider how these concepts and the noticings they invite may enhance a ventriloqual view and (perhaps selfishly), how they matter to me as I continue to develop my thinking and doing in discourse studies.

Keywords: ventriloquism, discourse analysis, indexicality, polycentricity

François Cooren's essay is both an invitation and a chance. In his reconstruction of a dialogue among traditions for communication theory, Cooren compels us to take communication seriously, by taking seriously the practices by which speakers materialize (the world in) communication. Cooren's metapragmatic move brings renewed focus to communication as the very matter in question, engaging us in an empirical interrogation of how the ventriloqual oscillations between world and speakers are consequential to both. For if we attend to the ways in which the "world speaks to us, through the way we make it talk and through the way it makes us talk" (Cooren, 2014, p. 11), our speaking indexes a relational ontology (Cooren, 2015) where we both take a position and, reflexively, are positioned. As a result, the mostly undertheorized idea that communication "constitutes" (organizations, reality, social life, and so on) opens up to empirical examination. The dichotomies of micro-macro, subjective-objective, "textual reduction and contextual segregation" (Iedema, 2011, p. 1167) and material-immaterial are pronounced theoretical dead-ends. To follow Cooren's lead is to

Language Under Discussion, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (November 2014), pp. 50–57

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allow ventriloquism to push us toward new noticings, new conversations, new questions for analysis (of discourse; interaction; communication).

In this response, I take up some of these noticings. I explore how Cooren's ideas might connect with current work in discourse studies and offer new analytical opportunities and questions for Communication. To do so, I stage an inter-action between Cooren's *ventriloqual* universe and the concepts of *affect*, *orders of indexicality* and *polycentricity* that animate the work of discourse scholars Rick Iedema and Jan Blommaert. In doing so, I consider how these concepts and the noticings they invite may enhance a ventriloqual view and (perhaps selfishly), how they matter to me as I continue to develop my thinking and doing in discourse studies.

The papers and the invitation

I begin with a small noticing, something that I found odd in the exchange between Kathy and Joseph (Cooren, 2014, p.4). The matter in questions is a moment in lines 5-8, when Joseph shows the stack of papers to Kathy. This showing and speaking is followed by Kathy's (as per my reading) phatic utterance "That's too bad. We'll miss you" on line 8. Cooren's analysis is of course on the mark, both in noting that Joseph makes the stack of papers speak, and that they do not speak for themselves. Indeed, Joseph offers an unsolicited account to speak on the papers' behalf and counter the invitation.

He tells Kathy that the papers (a) require his evaluation (line 6; that is, he is someone whose evaluation counts in a larger scheme of things) and (b) the papers require grades (again, an institutional mandate, and never mind that he might have left this to the last minute), (c) by tomorrow. Yet the curious thing that struck me (and I am not sure if Cooren is "with me" on this) is that the stack of papers on Joseph's desk could have been any papers at all. They could have been on his desk for months, not been students' work, but still act as *evidence* to decline the invitation. Kathy's contribution in line 8 therefore requires a sort of cooperation (if we are to go with Grice) or collusion, in authorizing Joseph's interpretation of the papers as urgent work, and therefore of Joseph himself as someone in a position to speak for work that needs doing *now*, work that Kathy, who may very well have the same work and papers on her desk to evaluate, does not appear to have the same urgency about. She is, in fact, going to dinner.

I also notice how Kathy's initial formulation ("would you like") displays a high degree of negative politeness, indicating that the dinner invitation might not, in fact, be one between friends. This, in addition to the late notice with which Kathy is asking (which alone would make it easy for Joseph to refuse), renders the extra weight afforded by her pronominal choice perhaps more of a matter of obligation than sincerity. In brief, there are curious tensions in the exchange, which suggest to me that there is more at stake than papers in the ways both Joseph and Kathy claim and disclaim which world is allowed to speak. But how to make the case for "something more"? And what might this something be?

Affect

One way to get to *it* might be Iedema's (2011) notion of *affect*. If Cooren speaks of figures, passion, and animation, and in fact takes emotions quite seriously in constructing ventriloquism, he would find an ally in Iedema. Unlike traditional analyses of discourse, affect

takes into account all that cannot be empirically shown, but is “felt” (and therefore a contentious matter for conversation analysts, I dare say). Iedema speaks of “forces—visceral forces...—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 1, in Iedema, 2011, p. 1170). Indeed, Iedema’s contention (provocation?) is that affect—emotions that flow across bodies—is a way to counteract the shortcomings of discourse analysis (and, I am certain, my own work so far among it) and its favoring of “analytical routines and frameworks” over “unfolding processes...vitalities, energies and continuities... whose logic underwrites discourse” (p. 1171). In looking to capture what moves us, what acts within us and makes us act, Iedema, much like Cooren, is onto something, though I am still not sure how to make the case for it as of yet, other than to employ a vocabulary of emotion and tentativeness in making analytical claims that something is *there*. Certainly, ventriloquism makes the case of speaking in the name of emotions and how emotions animate our speaking, but it appears to me that affect pushes for more.

As far as Joseph and Kathy go, all we have is a transcript with not much notation (and certainly not the kind of notation that a conversational analyst would find sufficient for data to speak), and yet I do sense the presence of affect, of energy passing through bodies as Joseph, to use a bodily metaphor, *goes out of his way* to mark the (im)propriety of invitation, of Kathy herself offering something only perfunctorily, and of the two of them colluding in the authorization of the papers as work as a way out of something that, perhaps, mattered to neither of them as something that should “come off,” but mattered to Joseph quite a bit to (as Iedema would have it) underwrite with energy.

Perhaps, a case for affect can be made for a note that I found on my windshield last summer:



In order to leave it, the author was moved to rip an envelope already in her or his possession so as to find a clean writing space, find a pen and a surface to write on (my car?) and yet conceal this emotional labor of the body by inscribing emotional labor in the text’s interdiscursive, tensional qualities: “please,” “thanks,” “try,” “better,” “next time.”

I kept this note because of the many ways it allows us to approach discourse as “movement, change, and action” (Iedema, 2011, p. 1171):¹ affect. In the emotion of the writer seeing my car, the impulse and the sound of tearing paper, the choice to vacate the scene and instead leave the note as a textual agent for me to find, remove from under the wipers, hold, read. And: the writer’s implicit mobilization of an absent and silent public that my parking presently and already troubled and could, in the future, inconvenience. All this emotion mobilized in the name of what matters and in order to mobilize shame in the name of defied civic duty, and, at the same time, managing to position the writer as not a shaming individual, but as a reasonable citizen, willing to give me another chance to redress the infraction, to make an effort, to try to park better. Like Joseph, whose urgent stack of papers (whatever papers they may be) indexes his priorities to meet deadlines over Kathy’s priorities to join others for dinner, the note writer is also speaking not just to me, but on behalf of a greater matter of concern (Latour, 2004) and for the benefit of a civically minded society. If our affect, our ventriloquial dynamics are about bodies and speaking, they are also very much about imagining our listeners, immediate and beyond. This is something that discourse analysis perhaps does not notice enough, and that ventriloquism definitely moves us closer to considering.

Orders of indexicality and polycentricity

The projected listener is to Bakhtin (1986) a superaddressee, an influential third party to whom we project our speech. The superaddressee is a normative center of appropriate social and cultural practices that supersedes our immediate addressee, allowing us to speak to a more encompassing body or evaluating authority (Blommaert, 2007). Calling this normative center an indexical order, or the dialectic between speaker, speech, and the semiotic universe continuously called into being, Michael Silverstein (2003) reminds us that in a polyphony, voices may be multiple but not equal. Instead, voices are organized, ordered and the indexical order is enmeshed in relations of authority. Going back to Joseph and Kathy, we see that Joseph speaks in academic register: in the name of due dates, evaluation, responsibility to students, academic work, work duties, sacrifice. If we want to go further, we might even say that he indexes, or enregisters, a version of the Protestant ethic that dictates work should come before rewards, or taking breaks. But what is Kathy’s center? There is an “us,” suggesting conviviality, community, the importance of sharing meals. The speech act of her invitation indexes the very cultural importance of the invitation ritual—declining—insistence (in the name of good manners)—acceptance—phatic regrets.² But what Joseph is indexing (or staging), from his position behind the desk of a faculty office, moves the evaluative center in his favor, devaluing Kathy’s invitation as speech indexing values of a lesser order.

Making worlds speak

Finally, I leave my badly parked car and the ill-fated invitation behind for a different setting altogether. I take Cooren’s brilliant insight to heart and examine “how the world

¹ Notice the similarity in Cooren’s wording “predispositions—attitudes, beliefs, traits, concerns, interests, passions, emotions, feelings—that... can be heard and felt in what [people] say or do (2014, p. 13).

² See Fitch (1991) for a great paper on this subject matter.

literally and figuratively speaks to us, through the way we make it talk and through the way it makes us talk (p. 11, italics in original)". I employ two extracts from a session of family therapy between therapist Linda Brown (T), a mother (M) and a father (F) to discuss sixteen year old Mike's (C) depression (Bartesaghi, 2005). It might help the reader to know that the goal of family therapy (and this is a general goal, though the adaptations of family therapy through the years are many) is to (re)frame or re-contextualize the problem or diagnosis of an identified patient, in this case, Mike, as part of a family dynamic.

Excerpt 1³

- 1 T: How do you see your depression, how do you make sense of it, what do you think
2 it's about?
(.5)
- 3 C: Sometimes I don't know (.) it just hits me.
- 4 T: Yeah, but if you think about it now, do you think it's about anything, I mean, if
5 you try and make sense of it? I know when you're in the moment, sometimes it
6 seems as if you're just standing there, the tide was low and all of a sudden this
7 wave rushes over you though I'm wondering if [now you
8 C: [I don't know=
9 T: = It's still a wave. How about some other times when it doesn't just rush over
10 you?
11 C: What, when I know it's coming?
12 T: Yeah, can you figure it out (.) I mean do you have any idea of what it's about
13 then?
14 C: If I'm thinking about something then I know it's because of that.
15 T: Uh huh.
16 C: It's just sometimes certain things I think about and then I know it's coming but
17 most of the time it just hits me and I don't know what hit me.

If the world speaks to us, this exchange invites us to consider that we make it talk in several ways, and each way indexes or mobilizes an entirely different order for the world to materialize. Extending Silverstein's (2003) notion of orders of indexicality, Blommaert speaks of polycentricity, (2007) or the existence of a superdiverse semiotic habitat that allows us to speak in many voices, registers, adopting several identities projected to various evaluative centers. In this exchange between Mike and the therapist there are two versions of depression, each speaking for and within a different world, a different center, and a different version of what makes us clients, therapists, people listening to (or making sense, thinking, see lines 1–2) the world. The therapist's uptake of Mike "it just hits me" (line 3) shows that she is conversant in both, for therapy (as a discourse) is multilingual,⁴ and allows for code-switching. In this case, Brown is partial to one. On the one hand, depression is a matter of functioning; on the other, it is a natural phenomenon. In Brown's version (lines 1, 5, 6, depression is something that Mike can "figure out," separate from and "see" and therefore

³ I transcribe here at a minimum level of detail:

Underline emphasis on a word

= utterances are latched, meaning there is no audible pause between different speakers' contributions

[overlapping speech, a speaker's turn overlaps that of the previous speaker

(.) an audible pause, like taking a breath

(.1), (.2) pauses timed in fractions of a second

⁴ The history of therapy, from Freud on, allows for therapists to speak to various centers, and with ease. They may speak of natural forces, mechanisms, systems, communication, brains, and chemical pathways, all in the same breath.

“make sense of.” In short, explain.) But Mike prefers (and notice his frustration on line 8) to speak for depression as a different kind of figure, toward a different center (lines 2 and 10): depression is a wave. It is an unstoppable, it is the sea, it is nature taking Mike with a force that he cannot predict. Both worlds could co-exist and speak. They are in fact, two possible metapragmatic orderings or centers in a polycentric universe of matters. The therapist can orient to depression as low tide and “rushing over” Mike (lines 6–7), but, for her to speak in therapeutic register, this orientation must be relegated to a “seeming,” for the world she is asking to speak and matter through Mike is a rational world. A world that speaks of etiology, family structure, where depression is the outcome, and has a cause. Mike’s answer in 14 merits attention: “If I’m thinking about something then I know it’s because of that.” Logically unpacked, this produces the *prima facie* tautology:

- (1) I think this because I am depressed
- (2) I am depressed because I think this

Whereby the relationship between (1) and (2) is one of endpoint/starting point or cause/outcome circularity, that is, depression is measured by thoughts of depression. There are no more worlds for therapy to speak, maybe too many centers for Brown to secure a footing, so she moves to include the parents’ voices for another possible world in the extract below.

Excerpt 2

- 18 T: One of the things that I was thinking about was that even though you and your
19 dad have a very nice relationship, and you have a nice relationship with your
20 mom, and you were able to tell your dad some stuff recently (.1) ((to Mother))
21 what is it that you think got in the way of Mike being able to tell you his secret?
22 M: The secret that he was carrying around (.) what particular secret are you talking
23 about?
24 T: The secret I was referring to was that he was depressed (.2) and I’m wondering
25 if you have any thoughts about why that may be?
26 M: Afraid that maybe he’ll let us [down
27 F: [Well, I don’t even know that he even realized
28 he was depressed to tell you the truth, I think he might have felt down but he
29 didn’t realize that =
30 T: =Right, what do you think, Mike, did you know that you were depressed?
31 C: I dunno.
32 T: Yeah, kind of hard to go back, so maybe that’s not the important thing.

Is there a secret in this exchange? And who can speak for it if there is? If depression is Mike’s secret (line 24, then depression ventriloquizes a world of psychoanalytic repression, where not telling a secret is the *cause* of depression (and telling the secret may prove to be the key to alleviating depression). If, however, as Brown also suggests as a possibility, depression is *not* telling a secret (line 21), then, as family therapy would have it, depression is the *outcome* of family dynamic. Another option, suggested by mother (line 26), is that Mike’s keeping of the secret of depression had something to do with the fear of letting his parents down. While this theory is, in principle, coherent with the model Brown is operating within, what it creates is a world that therapy cannot speak for or into:

(3) fear of telling = a family problem = depression = fear of telling

Where depression is at once language as symptom—that is, a sign of depression—as well as its agent and marker. To add to this polycentric matter, are: the mother’s frustration as to what event is, in fact, the “secret” (lines 22–23); the father’s use of the everyday register “having felt down” as a way to ironicize, or, literally, un-realize the diagnosis “depression” in line (28) and, Mike’s insufficient knowledge of or disaffiliation with the therapist’s speaking in the name of depression as knowable (lines 31–32). Since following the path of a patient’s ignorance of his own depression may not be an available narrative for this session, Brown finds herself unable to speak for the world that is at stake. The only way to proceed is out (line 32).

What to make of this conversation and possible worlds of depression that it materializes? For the sake of the argument, let us assume there are two options. The first, is that, as psychiatry would have it, inner world language is referential. That is, it need not be spoken for. It simply mirrors, in the sense criticized by Rorty a world already there. In this case, the problem becomes selecting between competing worlds that speak in an indexical order, where depression speaks through us as:

natural phenomenon (wave)	vs.	operating system (that can be figured out)
secret	vs.	act of keeping a secret
knowing when one is depressed	vs.	not knowing when one is depressed
a cause	vs. a process	vs. an endpoint

The second option necessitates a ventriloquial view, for it is a matter of who can speak in the name of depression as a human condition, or an array of feelings, a process of life events, and, finally, a diagnosis. That is, it asks us to consider how depression is a figure authorized in a relational ontology of the therapeutic. In the exchange between Brown and the family, this means appreciating how the therapist’s line of questioning and conversational (re)directions support the logic of insight (i.e. “figuring out”), and hermeneutics of hiddenness coherent with therapeutic actions. The account of depression—or the very affect and figures mobilized by the term itself—does not belong to a world that speaks to the therapy client or psychiatric patient. It is not a world that moves him, a world that hears him and can speak back, and that he can authorize and speak for. The way for the client to feel and act *as a depressed person* will require a shift to the therapeutic center, to therapeutic affect, to speaking for and in the name of therapy.

A note about noticings

(And by no means a final note – for as always an utterance calls for a response.)

In considering how a ventriloquial analysis asks us (me) to consider the ways in which communication materializes worlds by signifying them into being, Cooren’s vision is invaluable to discourse studies. In this note, I also suggested that Cooren’s brilliant ideas

might be engaged in an interesting dialogue with other current work of interdisciplinary scholars such as Iedema and Blommaert. My own analysis questions the ability of speakers to make the world that matters to them talk; that is, it may also be important to ask if what matters to communicators who are asymmetrically ordered in their speaking is sufficient to become what matters to (or materializes in) the world that speaks.⁵

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⁵ The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewer for the valuable feedback on this manuscript, François Cooren for his continued generosity, and the writer of the parking note for obvious reasons.