

Ventriloquism and accountability

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Abstract. François Cooren's ventriloquist pragmatism aims to do justice to the richness and complexity of communication and is informed by a wide range of communication theories. While I share Cooren's pragmatist intuitions, I am less certain about his ventriloquist pragmatism (or pragmatist ventriloquism). I therefore ask, first, what we gain from the ventriloquism metaphor; and, second, how pragmatism serves as a meta-perspective and how ventriloquism facilitates a dialogue *between* the seven traditions of communication theory he identifies. Finally, I consider a Habermasian theory of communicative action as a possibly preferable alternative.

Keywords: ventriloquism, communicative action, intersubjectivity, accountability

François Cooren's (2014) insightful conception of communication aims to do justice to communication's richness and complexity and is informed by a wide range of communication theories. Cooren shows great sensitivity to the plethora of considerations interlocutors need to take into account: They draw on their environments and their particular situations and contexts in communicating with one another; they not only express their own intentions when they speak, but sometimes also speak for others; at the same time, their intentions (as well as their beliefs and desires) are shaped by their individual as well as collective and socio-cultural histories and experiences; they are accountable for the claims they make in speaking and draw on these histories, environments, and situations to make good on their claims. The meaning of what interlocutors say is thus not solely up to them, but shaped by their relations to the world. It is not easy to combine all of these elements in a unified and coherent theory, and I agree with Cooren that pragmatism provides the right kind of theoretical framework. I

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am much less certain, however, that the kind of ventriloquist pragmatism (or pragmatist ventriloquism) Cooren proposes is required. In what follows, I raise two questions and conclude by briefly adumbrating an alternative to ventriloquism: First, what do we gain from the ventriloquism metaphor? Second, why is pragmatism the preferred stance for a meta-perspective and how does Cooren's pragmatism facilitate a dialogue *between* the seven traditions of communication theory that he identifies? And finally, might a Habermasian theory of communicative action present a better alternative to ventriloquism?

1. The ventriloquism metaphor

The basic idea of ventriloquism is that a speaker makes other figures speak and is made to speak by them. By ventriloquism, Cooren means "that people who communicate are implicitly or explicitly mobilizing figures—the name ventriloquists sometimes use to speak about their dummies—that are *made to say* things when interactions take place" (pp. 1–2). A figure is very broadly construed and may include "anything or anyone that we *speak for*" from other people to inanimate objects, concepts, or ideologies (p. 2). But ventriloquism is not a one-way street. Cooren holds that "the world ... figuratively and literally talks to us ... because we make it speak to us, and also because it makes us speak" (p. 2). That is, we ventriloquize figures, but are also ventriloquized by them (p. 6).

It is not entirely clear, however, what is gained by this broad-brush linguistification and whether the "analytical payoff" of ventriloquism is worth the price. Ventriloquism, Cooren acknowledges, is a metaphor (p. 9). Setting aside the worry that treating everything involved in discourse as a figure or being (p. 4) may lead to undue reification, what are the advantages of the metaphor, of the view that *everything* speaks or can speak? Why opt for ventriloquial pragmatism as opposed to pragmatism *tout court*? What drawbacks might there be? Might the metaphor be stretched too far?

Referring to the example of a conversation between Kathy and Joseph, in which Joseph declines Kathy's dinner invitation, Cooren writes that Joseph "*invokes* the amount of work he has" and "can thus be said to be *ventriloquizing* this workload to the extent that he literally and figuratively *makes it say* that he should decline Kathy's invitation... By inviting Kathy to look at what is on his desk, Joseph hopes that the situation will *speak for itself*" (p. 5). But in what way does Joseph make the workload *literally* say anything? Is saying that the situation speaks for itself not simply another metaphor? After all, if it *did* speak for itself, it would not need to be ventriloquized. Why is it not sufficient—and more accurate—merely to say that Joseph cites his workload *as a reason* to decline? (This would fit with Cooren's references to Garfinkel and accountability, to which I will return.) I take no issue with the insight that we both draw on and are animated by a wide range of factors that we may call figures in our speech, that we are, in Cooren's terms, both "actors" and "passers". But I don't see why this needs to be cast in terms of interlocutors both ventriloquizing and being ventriloquized by such figures, making them say things and being made to say things by them (p. 6). Moreover, to claim that Joseph and Kathy "are both depicted as *ventriloquizing* these figures and as *ventriloquized* by them" (p. 6) is to equivocate between two quite different kinds of relationship and agency. We can distinguish between speaking for someone or something and making her or it say something. When I speak or sign a form for or on behalf of my child, for example, it is because legally, he *cannot* speak for himself. He cannot be held legally

responsible or accountable; I am accountable on his behalf. Because the accountability rests with me, however, it's not clear whether I make my child say anything, much less whether he makes me speak. Joseph's workload cannot be held responsible for, say, keeping Joseph from the dinner either. Unlike my son, who can offer plenty of justifications or rationalizations for what he says and does outside the legal context, Joseph's workload cannot justify itself. For it cannot (literally) speak. The sense in which the workload makes Joseph speak and the sense in which he makes it speak, in other words, are quite different.

A ventriloquist's dummy also cannot literally speak. Even whether the ventriloquist *literally* makes the dummy say things, however, is open to debate.¹ Arguably, she instead *makes it appear as if* the dummy is speaking. This context of pretense and illusion complicates the question of what it makes sense to say is *literally* the case. In contrast, when Joseph invokes his workload or points at his stack of papers, he is not thereby *making* these things *say* anything nor making it appear as if they speak. In fact, to say that Joseph is making it appear as if the workload is keeping him from joining Kathy is to attribute an altogether different intention to him. Unfortunately, Cooren addresses neither the fact that the ventriloquist creates an illusion nor the possible implications of using a metaphor of illusion to conceptualise communication. Yet these seem to point to important limitations of the metaphor.

A similar issue arises in Cooren's reading of pragmatism and semiotics. He writes, "The world, according to a pragmatist position, is ... not mute, silent, or voiceless. It is a world that *tells us things*, by either confirming or contradicting what we believe is the case" (p. 9). Referring to James and Mead, he rightly emphasizes that "the world acts on us as much as we act on it" and that we in turn respond to the situations in which we find ourselves (p. 9). Because semiotics attributes to signs the capacity to do things (to represent, to indicate, to evoke, or to tell), it, too, "helps us see that the world that surrounds us is not mute or voiceless" (p. 11). Undeniably the world has many kinds of effects on us. Yet why conceive of the agency of the world and of signs as a form of speaking? Speaking and telling imply intentionality: When I speak, I intend to communicate with my interlocutor(s), to reach a mutual understanding with them, or to have an effect on my audience. Surely, we would be mistaken to attribute intentionality² in this sense to a pile of papers, signs, or the world in general. I am neither defending an intentionalist theory of meaning à la Grice (i.e. one that analyzes meaning in terms of speaker intentions), nor am I denying that there are a plethora of different factors that move us to speak or that we invoke in speaking. We may not even be (fully) aware of all of them. But in communication, interlocutors have a distinct status, which ventriloquism seems to undermine by putting interlocutors on a par with everything else as figures. The linguistification of the agency of signs and of the world thus obscures the different ways in which different constituents of our world may affect us (causally, inferentially, emotionally, etc.). Joseph's workload functions as a *reason* for him to decline Kathy's invitation; Kathy herself is not a *reason* but an *interlocutor* who can be engaged in dialogue and can provide reasons for what she says. Ventriloquism thus downplays the

¹ Austin's (1962) distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts may be of some help here.

² One might argue that even *agency* implies intentionality. Consider the distinction between action (i.e. intentional) and (mere) behavior.

intersubjectivity of communication and assimilates non-intentional causes or reasons to intentional agents. This becomes particularly clear if we consider the notion of accountability. Joseph, as an intentional agent, is accountable for his actions. Suppose, for example, that the pile of papers on his desk is not a stack of papers he has to grade, but old papers he is taking out for recycling. The papers are surely not accountable for his declining Kathy's invitation by prevarication, but he no doubt is. On the one hand, Cooren recognizes the multitude of ways we are affected, but, on the other, he elides them by saying that everything and anything can be a figure that speaks. Here the ventriloquism metaphor appears to be stretched beyond its limits and makes relationships that are quite different from each other look the same.

2. Metaperspective

Cooren understands ventriloquism as a form of pragmatism that offers a way of mediating among other traditions of studying communication, namely, rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, cybernetics, sociopsychology, sociocultural theory, and critical theory (p. 1). Pragmatism offers this metaperspective because it is able to address their various key concerns or points of emphasis (what he calls their "design specs"). In this regard, Cooren's is a comprehensive and systematic project. Yet "[t]he ventriloquial thesis does not claim that it is possible or even desirable to reconcile these traditions with each other. It shows, however, that it is possible to respond to some of their *design* specs, that is, to indications regarding what, according to each tradition, any theory of communication should pay attention to and acknowledge" (p. 15). I am sympathetic to Cooren's thesis, but would have liked to see a more explicit argument for why pragmatism—rather than any of the other theories—is in this privileged position.

There is noteworthy overlap and continuity between the design specs of the various traditions as Cooren characterizes them. Rhetoric, for instance, is concerned with the constitutive nature of communication (p. 10); phenomenology examines how interlocutors co-construct situations (p. 12). Cybernetics focuses on how systems (re)produce themselves (p. 12), and sociocultural theory on how social order is (re)produced (p. 14). Semiotics as well as phenomenology are described as committed to the view that the world is not silent or mute but intelligible and accountable (pp. 16, 18). Although Cooren at times seems to want to reduce the design specs of each tradition to a single point, his own discussion shows that the different traditions have rich design specs and more often than not pay attention to manifold aspects of communication. Furthermore, different thinkers within a given tradition are likely to have different points of emphasis or, for that matter, may draw on other traditions. Now, if the design specs of both semiotics and phenomenology, for instance, include that the world is not silent, but speaks (Table 1, p. 16), why do they need pragmatism to mediate or to foster dialogue between them? Even if the point is that pragmatism shares concerns not only with one or two traditions but with *all* of them, can it facilitate a dialogue between perspectives that do not already share concerns?

Cooren presents at least two instances in which dialogue with pragmatism makes it possible to address difficulties and defuse tensions arising *within* one of the traditions. First, the design specs of rhetoric emphasize the constitutive as well as situational nature of discourse and communication (p. 17). The ventriloquial pragmatist perspective allows Cooren

to mediate between rhetoricians who view constitution as a subjective process and those who view it as an objective one because pragmatism recognizes—in ways in which neither of these camps does—that while speakers may define and thus constitute situations by what they say, they are also responding to the demands of situations (p. 17). Second, cybernetics emphasizes the autopoiesis, the independent self-generation, of systems. To the extent that systems (re)produce themselves and have their own logic, they are autonomous. But this makes it difficult to see any room for individual agency. Pragmatism, Cooren points out, recognizes not only that agents are part of self-organizing systems, but that these systems must be enacted by participants and, to that extent, are *also* heteronomous. Systems are thus characterized by “hetero-autonomy” or “auto-heteronomy” (p. 20). In both cases, pragmatism thus overcomes a dichotomy that leads to a theoretical impasse within a tradition. Are there examples where this happens *between* traditions?

Finally, if the perspectives cannot be reconciled, what does it mean to say that pragmatism is a metaperspective? Does Cooren understand pragmatism to be a unified perspective? Is its advantage over other traditions its non-foundationalist and anti-reductionist pluralism, allowing it not to privilege some design specs over others? If it is not a unified theory, how does ventriloquial pragmatism address its internal pluralism and any inconsistencies that may come with it?

3. Critical Pragmatism without ventriloquism

The focus on pragmatism and the inclusion of critical theory as one of the seven perspectives brings to mind the critical theorist Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action and formal pragmatics, which may serve as a foil to ventriloquism. Habermas draws on phenomenology, sociocultural theory, pragmatism (Peirce, Dewey, Mead), hermeneutics, systems theory, and, of course, critical theory, aiming to integrate them into a unified theory of society, often by using one of the traditions to address shortcomings in another, though not claiming that his critical social theory constitutes a metaperspective *per se*. In “Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning”, for example, he argues that intentionalist semantics, formal semantics, and use-theories of meaning all prioritize on one aspect of communication (speaker intentions, truth conditions, and contexts of interaction respectively) to the exclusion of the others, but that his formal pragmatics can capture them all (Habermas 1998). This seems to be just what Cooren requires of a metaperspective.³ Yet the theory of communicative action avoids ventriloquism’s sweeping linguistification and thus the difficulties noted above. Instead, it differentiates among a variety of relationships between speakers and the world and, most importantly, emphasizes the intersubjective nature of communication.

Habermas distinguishes between communicative action, oriented toward reaching understanding, and strategic action, oriented toward success (i.e. actors aiming to realize their individual goals). Language can be used strategically as well as communicatively, but Habermas insists that the communicative use is primary and that strategic or other (e.g. fictional) uses are parasitic on it. Although some have challenged the distinction as

³ There are other passages suggesting that Habermas thinks of critical theory as a metaperspective in Cooren’s sense (if I understand Cooren correctly) (e.g. Habermas 1987, 375). For a more pluralist conception of critical theory, see Bohman (2001).

problematic, it is important in juxtaposition with Cooren because it emphasizes the intersubjectivity and dialogical nature of communication in a way that ventriloquism does not.

In communicative language use, speakers aim to reach mutual understanding with one another about the world by implicitly or explicitly raising three types of validity claims: claims to truth, normative rightness, and sincerity (Habermas 1998; Fultner 2011). Thus interlocutors can represent the world, establish interpersonal relationships with one another, and express their subjective, internal states. To understand an utterance is to know its conditions of acceptability, to know the kinds of reasons that could be marshaled to justify it, that is, to be able to make good on the validity claims that are raised. When we communicate, we not only make claims, but we also take on the warrant to make good on them. That is, we are *accountable* for what we say. This is part of what makes communication an inherently *intersubjective* practice. Claims to truth can be made good on with reference to the objective world of objects and facts; claims to normative rightness with reference to the social (or intersubjective) world of norms and values; claims to sincerity, refer to the subjective world of beliefs, desires, and other mental states and are redeemed not discursively but through one's actions. Cooren mentions Garfinkel's (1967) notion of accountability and connects it with intelligibility (pp. 7, 18), but for Habermas, this connection is central. Redeeming claims, I submit, is an explicit form of what Cooren calls "mobilizing figures", but without raising the intentionality issues mentioned above. When John refers to his stack of papers to be graded, he is making good on his previous claim that he cannot join Kathy by referring to a state of affairs in the objective world. What John does not explicitly thematize is a norm belonging to the social world, namely, his obligation to do his work. This norm remains in the "background" of the lifeworld against which utterances are intelligible.⁴ We might say that in any given speech situation, some figures, to use Cooren's (2014) term, remain in the background yet nonetheless contribute to the intelligibility of what is said and stand ready, as it were, to be mobilized. That is, they contribute to making an utterance intelligible and, though not thematized, are thematizable; they may be drawn upon if the situation requires it. In short, the theory of communicative action foregrounds the intersubjectivity of communication; and, by differentiating between different kinds of validity claims, formal pragmatics differentiates between different *kinds* of reasons interlocutors may offer (moral, ethics, personal, factual, etc.), and hence different ways in which they are affected and effect change themselves. The Habermasian account I have adumbrated no doubt requires further unpacking and modification, as formal pragmatics has not been immune to criticism. Nonetheless, it offers a non-ventriloquist and, I suggest, more variegated account of communication.⁵

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⁴ For discussion of Habermas' conception of the lifeworld as a background of intelligibility as well as its relationship to the objective, social, and subjective worlds, see Fultner (2001).

⁵ Thanks to Jonathan Maskit and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments.

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