

Pragmatism as ventriloquism: A reply to comments

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Abstract. In this article, I reply to each of the discussion notes written in response to one of my essays, titled “Pragmatism as ventriloquism: Creating a dialogue among seven traditions in the study of communication,” which was published in the second volume of *Language Under Discussion*. In this reply to Ronald Arnett’s, John Barnden’s, Mariaelena Bartesaghi’s, Barbara Fultner’s, Chris Russil’s, and Elizabeth Wilhoit’s notes, I point out that ventriloquism is not only about intersubjectivity, but also about interobjectivity, that is a matter of making the world say things about itself. I also point out that the ventriloquial thesis is a relational thesis that defends the possibility to move toward a form of objectivity and truth.

Keywords: ventriloquism, pragmatism, relational thesis, metaphors, methodology

“Facts are ventriloquist’s dummies. Sitting on a wise man’s knee they may be made to utter words of wisdom; elsewhere, they say nothing, or talk nonsense, or indulge in sheer diabolism”

Aldous Huxley, *Time must have a stop*,
Chatto & Windus, 1945, p. 301

Ventriloquism is about making one speak (*faire parler*, as we say in French), a factitive¹ expression that conveys not only what leads us to say what we say, but also what beings are made to say things when we talk, write, or more generally, communicate. In this chain of

¹ The adjective “factitive” is used to qualify grammatical constructions that refer to a form of “causing to do.” Typical factitive constructions are “I made him do it” or “She made me think of this book that I had read two years ago.” For more details, see Greimas and Courtés (1982) as well as Lyons (1977).



agency (Castor and Cooren, 2006; Cooren, 2010; Cooren et al., 2006) with no absolute beginning and end, human beings can thus metaphorically be identified or positioned as ventriloquists and ventriloquized. Ventriloquist because humans make things say or do things (as when one invokes a protocol that is supposed to remind one's interlocutor about what has to be done). Ventriloquized because humans are made to say or do things by various things (facts, emotions, words they pronounce, various sources of attachment, etc., as when what one person is saying makes him or her come across as overcritical while it was not necessarily this person's intention to be so). The equivocal character of the word "thing" is purposefully mobilized here to highlight the multiplicity and varieties of elements and beings that people can ventriloquize or that can ventriloquize them when they communicate.

It will come as no surprise that I consider the discussion this article takes part in as a form of ventriloquism. Ronald Arnett (2014), John Barnden (2014), Mariaelena Bartesaghi (2014), Barbara Fultner (2014), Chris Russill (2014), and Elizabeth Wilhoit (2014) have done me the honor of writing notes in response to my focus article (Cooren 2014), notes for which I thank them wholeheartedly. In their remarks and critiques, they often made me say things that I acknowledge as indeed saying, while, in other parts, I did not always recognize myself (but that might be my bad faith speaking right now, who knows...). Whether we agree or not about what I actually said (or what my focus article actually said), we also sometimes disagree about the validity of some of my positions, that is, the degree to which these positions faithfully ventriloquize or express the way communication and language are supposed to work in general. It is precisely in this ventriloquial game that we find the essence of a discussion, debate or conversation. In the case of this discussion, it is indeed not enough to make each other say things; we must also agree that these things were indeed said and that they help us understand language and communication.

In what follows, I propose to reply to each note, by following the alphabetic order of their authors. It is my hope that these authors will at least recognize themselves in my responses. For the rest, I can only wish that our disagreements and agreements generate further discussions and dialogues, hoping that our understanding of language and communication comes out stronger from them. Echoing Huxley's aphorism, I sincerely believe we are all wise ventriloquists in this conversation (no nonsense, no indulgence and especially, no diabolism).

Ronald Arnett

In his beautiful note titled "Ventriloquism as communicative music," Ronald Arnett (2014) asks, at one point, "At what stage in your life do you look in a mirror and see a mother or father who is now you? At what stage do you see yourself articulating a position only to hear your own voice?" (p. 43). To address these two questions, which illustrate, for him, what he calls "the profundity and simple elegance of ventriloquism" (p. 43), he recounts an anecdote where his then young son asked him one day, "Will you always be my friend?" To this surprising question, he heard himself answering what follows:

Absolutely—until any moment in your life when I must give up your friendship to be your dad and to do what is necessary and helpful for you. At that moment, I am not your friend. I am forever your dad. I am responsible for you. I cannot promise as a dad that I will always be

right, but I can promise as a dad that I will always give you the best I have to offer and, if possible, a little more. (p. 43)

While meditating on the origin of his response, he then realized that he was, in fact, speaking his own father's words, that is, ventriloquizing what the latter had himself told him when he was a child. As he points out, "I was speaking the words of my father, and now those words emerged from me for my son" (Arnett, 2014, p. 44).

This is indeed a nice case of ventriloquism and for many reasons. First, we note the vacillation/oscillation, which is typical of this phenomenon: Speaking his father's words means that Arnett made him speak, even if he did not explicitly stage his dad in what he said to his son. In other words, some form of ventriloquism remains more implicit, while others can, on the contrary, be quite overt. For instance, he could have said, "As my father used to say, ...," which would have staged his father in this ventriloquial act. But speaking the words of his father also means—and this is something that Arnett also realizes retrospectively—that his father, to some extent, made him say what he said to his son.

What does it mean? Simply that Arnett was not only the ventriloquist in this episode, but also, to some extent, his father's puppet, figure, or mouthpiece. It is only after the fact that he realized he had spoken his father's words, which means that he was not conscious of what or who was being channeled when he was speaking to his son. Of course, the father did not mean to make him say what he said, but his words were apparently memorable or remarkable enough to produce this effect. As we also see in this compelling illustration, the phenomenon of ventriloquism is not necessarily the result of intentional acts. Arnett's father did not intend him to say what he said to his son and Arnett himself did not mean to repeat his father's words when he spoke to his child. However, this is still what apparently happened.

What is crucial in this analysis is to avoid the trap of reductionism. Arnett is not only his father's puppet or mouthpiece, he is also the ventriloquist, that is, he is reacting to a specific situation he is confronted with: that is, responding to his son, hopefully meaningfully. It is therefore possible to acknowledge that we are, *to some extent*, dummies, without reducing us to this identity. We are ventriloquists, too, that is, when we speak, it is also *our* voice that we hear, as Arnett elegantly points out.

John Barnden

In his discussion note titled "Questioning ventriloquism," John Barnden (2014) adopts a more critical posture vis-à-vis ventriloquism as a metaphor for communication. His first worry concerns the illustration I use in the focus article, which I will reproduce here for the sake of clarity:

- 1 Kathy: Would you like to join us for dinner tonight?
- 2 (1.0)
- 3 Joseph: Uh, I'm sorry but I really have too much work. I cannot come.
- 4 Kathy: Are you sure?
- 5 Joseph: Yeah. (0.5) Just look what's on my desk ((showing her a stack
- 6 of papers on his desk)). I have all these papers to evaluate
- 7 and the grades are due tomorrow.
- 8 Kathy: That's too bad. We'll miss you
- 9 Joseph: I'll certainly miss you too

Commenting on his interpretation of my analysis of this interaction, Barnden (2014) then writes,

[I]n 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. 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 (p. 36)

Note here how Barnden's reconstruction of my analysis just consists of positioning Joseph as the ventriloquist, while the original analysis in the focus article did not operate such a reduction. Joseph is indeed both the ventriloquist and the dummy in this episode. Why the ventriloquist? Because he tells Kathy, in line 5, "Just look what's on my desk" to show her a stack of papers, which could typically look like papers to be graded. If we think a minute about the reason why Joseph is doing that, I think we would be hard pressed not to acknowledge that he intends the presence of this stack of papers to *tell* Kathy something, that is, that he has a lot of work. But because of the vacillation/oscillation I highlighted previously, Joseph can also be seen, to some extent, as the dummy. Why the dummy? Because it is apparently these papers he has to grade that *lead him to say* what he is saying to Kathy. This is alluded to by Barnden (2014) when he writes, "and the ventriloquist is making it look as though the dummy is telling Joseph to decline the invitation" (p. 36). However, note that this is not exactly what I am saying here (and this is not what I was saying in the focus article either). Joseph is not really making it look as though this stack of papers is telling him to decline the invitation. He is showing this stack of papers *to* Kathy, which means that she is the one who is supposed to realize what this stack of papers is supposed to tell her about the situation.

Another aspect of Barnden's (2014) analysis can also be considered problematic when he writes. "The influence of the workload on Joseph is metaphorically cast as the spoken command uttered by the dummy. But, at the same time, the influence is not really created by the workload itself, but is rather a product of Joseph's own attitude to the workload" (p. 36). Note here how this way of seeing the situation amounts to ignoring the difference the workload is making in this situation. For Barnden, the workload does not really lead Joseph to say what he is saying; it is, in fact, Joseph's *attitude* that Barnden presents as only making a difference. My point is not to deny that this attitude indeed makes a difference, but to highlight that you need *both* this attitude and the workload in order to understand what is happening (for more on attitudes, see Van Vuuren and Cooren, 2010). Having an attitude in

this case precisely consists of considering that this workload *matters* and that it should be dealt with before thinking of going out. *If it matters, it means, by definition, that it has some bearing on the situation that is at stake.*

This point is absolutely crucial as it is precisely what pragmatism and semiotics invite us to realize: We do not live in a world where *only* our attitudes matter and make a difference. *We live in a world to which we also react and respond.* So when Barnden writes that, “the dummy is not speaking through its own independent agency” (Barnden, 2014, p. 34), I actually beg to differ. The workload speaks to the extent that it manages to tell both Kathy and Joseph that this invitation should be declined (and I will presently explain what I mean here by “speaking” and “telling”). If Barnden then retorts that this act depends on Kathy’s and Joseph’s understanding, I completely agree with him, but this is precisely the essence of ventriloquism: *understanding the situation is about what this situation tells us*, a claim that conveys the very spirit of a pragmatist/semiotic/relational position.

But, of course, we have to agree about what speaking and telling mean here. Barnden (2014) writes in this regard:

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. (p. 36)

In response to this critique, I would first point out that the metaphor of ventriloquism has, *like all metaphors*, its own limitations. I used it from 2007 because I thought that it would help readers quickly visualize the phenomenon of *making one speak*, but it is clear that Joseph is not *throwing his voice*, as the ventriloquists like to say, to make the stack of papers *explicitly* say that he is too busy to join his friends for dinner. I therefore find this critique unfair, as I never claimed that this interaction could be completely identified with a situation where, say, Joseph would hold this stack of paper on his lap and make it utter something (who, in fact, could be seriously thinking that this is the thesis I am trying to defend?).

However, I also disagree with Barnden (2014) when he points out at the end of this quote that “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” (p. 36). Although I, of course, agree that the metaphor of ventriloquism has its own limitations (limitations that I just explained), I would not go as far as saying that the dummy is not really speaking, saying or telling anything. It is *speaking, saying or telling* something to the extent that both Kathy and Joseph can *interpret what it means*. Interpreting anything—a painting, a text, what someone says, a situation—consists, by definition, in making it say something. By “say,” I do not mean, of course, that the painting, text or situation starts to utter words in and

by itself, I mean that it *can be identified as an active participant in a communicative act*. In other words, it *makes a difference* in a way similar to a stop sign that indicates where drivers or bikers should stop at an intersection. Saying or telling something amounts to acknowledging the intelligibility/comprehensibility/understandability of what we are confronted with, which is a position that, as pointed out in the focus article, essentially comes from semiotics and phenomenology.

I thought I would not have to defend the limitations of the ventriloquial metaphor (which should be obvious, I think, to anyone), but it is essential for me to highlight this intelligibility by which the world manages to metaphorically *speak to us*, that is, *tells us things about itself*. When Barnden (2014) writes a little later,

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 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). (pp. 36–37)

To imply that the expression “what the situation commands” should be understood as fiction is, I think, inaccurate, as we are not speaking of a fictional world here (even if I, of course, acknowledge that I did invent this case for the sake of the demonstration, a piece of information that is mentioned in the focus article). We are speaking of Joseph *showing* Kathy the stack of papers and *saying*, “Just look what’s on my desk.” *For Joseph*, this situation apparently commands or dictates that he decline Kathy’s invitation. The “for Joseph” is here crucial, as it shows the *relational* character of this act of ventriloquism. It is *also* because Joseph has certain attitudes vis-à-vis work—a certain work ethics, some would maybe say (Bartesaghi (2014) even identifies this rectitude as a version of what Max Weber would have called a protestant ethics)—that the presence of this stack of papers *enjoins* him to decline this invitation. With someone else, this stack of papers might not have mattered or counted as much (or might have even not counted at all), which means that the situation would have been completely different. It also means that *the presence of this stack of papers would have told nothing to this person or at least it would have told something else*.

My understanding of Barnden’s (2014) position (and I realize that I might be putting words in his mouth at this point) is that he wants to be able to identify an absolute source to explain what is happening in this situation, a position that contradicts the relational/pragmatist stance I defend with the metaphor of ventriloquism. This appears quite clear when he writes,

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. (p. 37)

As we see, for Barnden (2014), it is always Joseph who is the absolute source of the influence and never the workload that he is showing to Kathy (he writes elsewhere that “it is Joseph himself who somehow causes the influence the workload has on him” (p. 37)). This is precisely this human-centered vision of communication that the ventriloquial thesis tries to fight against. As pointed out before, it is not enough to acknowledge attitudes or what interactants do. We also have to acknowledge not only *what* these attitudes are about, but also to what extent this *what* matters in the situation, i.e., does something.

Mariaelena Bartesaghi

In her discussion note, titled “Ventriloquism as a matter for discourse analysis,” Mariaelena Bartesaghi (2014) adopts a constructive view on the ventriloquial thesis by creating the conditions of a dialogue with current work in discourse studies, especially in connection with Rick Iedema’s work on affect and Jan Blommaert’s concepts on orders of indexicality and polycentricity. Starting with Iedema, she notes that, “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” (p. 52). Affects are, as she points out, “emotions that flow across bodies” (p. 52), emotions that can only be felt, which make their identification difficult to conversation analysts.

To illustrate her point, Bartesaghi (2014) uses the example of a note that she found once on her car windshield. The note read, “Please try parking better next time. THANKS.” Commenting on this note, she then writes,

I kept this note because of the many ways it allows us to approach discourse as “movement, change, and action” (Iedema, 2011, p. 1171): 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. (p. 53)

This anecdote is indeed revealing because it invites us to imagine or reconstruct what led the person to write what she wrote. As Bartesaghi points out, taking the time and energy to tear a piece of paper, find a pen, write a note, and put it on the car’s windshield, which is

what the author of this note obviously did in this case, shows that this person was moved, driven or animated by something strong enough to produce such an effect on him or her.

But what is this “something”? Probably—but we will, of course, never know for sure—some form of frustration/irritation/annoyance/anger at the way Bartesaghi parked her car, which is the affect Bartesaghi and Iedema refer to. But where do these emotions come from? First we could note that emotions or affects can only be triggered because specific things *matter* to people. In this case, we can imagine that parking spaces matter to this person and that she cannot stand people who, according to her or him, park badly and consequently encroach upon other people’s parking spots. As we see, the idea of parking badly means that for this person, there is a *right way* to park, which is the norm/standard/rule he or she seems *attached* to. This is, as Barnden might point out, his or her general *attitude* vis-à-vis parking.

By transgressing this norm, standard or rule, Bartesaghi thus unintentionally brought this person’s wrath down onto her (even if this wrath was politely conveyed, as she rightfully noticed). For the author of the note, this situation—Bartesaghi’s alleged bad parking—is presumably intolerable/unacceptable and dictates/commands an intervention, which takes the form of the writing of a note placed on a windshield. This person’s attitude certainly makes a difference in this affect—in other words, this is *also* what ventriloquizes itself in this note—but it would be a mistake (in a not-that-implicit response to Barnden) not to take into account another element of the situation in the equation, that is, the way Bartesaghi’s car was parked, a way that was, for this person, unacceptable enough to trigger this course of action.

Again, we find here the essence of the ventriloquial/pragmatist/relational approach I defend in the focus article: people respond/react to what (they consider that) situations require/command/indicate/require and this is why affects/emotions/motivations have indeed to be taken into account in our analyses.

Bartesaghi (2014) also establishes a nice parallel between ventriloquism and Blommaert’s (2007) notions of polycentricity and orders of indexicality. As she insightfully notes, “the note writer is also speaking not just to me, but on behalf of a greater matter of concern ... and for the benefit of a civically minded society” (p. 53). In other words, other things appear to matter to this person, which means that these things implicitly materialize themselves in this note through different voices—duty, rectitude, correctness, or civility—which can also be *felt* and *recognized* in the content of the note. Whether she is aware of it or not, the author of this message also implicitly claims to speak in the name of what is just or acceptable, which means that we could go as far as saying that it is even society itself that also allegedly speaks through this note. In other words, Bartesaghi could interpret—and this is explicitly mentioned in her comments—this note as demonstrating what members of the society she is involved in think of her parking in general. There is therefore polycentricity because of the multiplicity of the addressees/interlocutors, but also because of the multiplicity of the addressers/authors, a form of polyphony that ventriloquism also helps us understand.

This is what Bartesaghi nicely illustrates in the family therapy excerpts she analyzes later. Analyzing a conversation from a ventriloquial perspective amounts to highlighting how various elements of the world we live in manage or not to express themselves through a given interaction. For a teenager suffering from depression, it is, for instance, how this depression manages to express itself in a dialogue with, say, a therapist, when he says that

the depression *hits him like a wave*. For a family therapist, it is, as Bartesaghi shows, what kind of family dynamic might express itself *through* this depression. Can these two worlds—the world where depressions are waves and the world where depressions are products of family dynamic—speak to each other? Apparently not that easily, at least in the case Bartesaghi analyzes.

As she points out,

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.

In other words, we see how the metaphor of ventriloquism invites us to take seriously—or at least pay attention or listen to—the various worlds that express themselves in any discussion or exchange. There is no cut that separates these worlds from the world of conversation as all these worlds communicate with each other. Being a therapist thus also amounts to welcoming the world that her patient expresses, a world that might not fit with what matters to this therapist, but that could matter to him.

Barbara Fultner

In her discussion note titled “Ventriloquism and accountability,” Barbara Fultner (2014) critically investigates the ventriloquial metaphor by questioning the way I analyze the interaction between Kathy and Joseph. As she writes:

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*” ([Cooren, 2014,] 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? (Fultner, 2014, p. 59)

As I tried to show in the focus article, ventriloquizing consists of making various figures speak, figures that, by oscillation/vacillation can also be said to make us say things. When I said that Joseph hoped that the situation would speak for itself, I alluded to the way we often proceed when we *show* something to someone in an interaction. In order to illustrate my point, just imagine another situation: The doorbell rings. I open the front door and see my friend, Daniel, on the porch. He tells me, “So what happened?” to which I reply, “It’s a real disaster. Look at that!”, showing him what happened to our house. Daniel then responds, “Wow, that’s a big mess indeed!” Saying, “Look at that” here consists of showing Daniel something that is supposed, in my opinion, to *speak for itself* (the fact, for instance, that we had a flood in our house). Interestingly—and it is, I think, the beauty of ventriloquism—this

self-effacement is, of course, partial on my part, as I am also obviously *making* this situation speak for itself (precisely by saying, “Look at that!”).

So when Fultner writes, “After all, if it *did* speak for itself, it would not need to be ventriloquized,” I beg to differ. Human beings are actually quite good at *making figures speak for themselves*. In other words, speaking for itself *always* is, by definition, an act of ventriloquism. It is not only the person who said, “Look at that” who makes the situation speak (for itself), but it is, of course, also the interlocutor—Daniel—who participates in this phenomenon by *acknowledging the obviousness of what this situation indeed tells of itself*. In other words, speaking for itself means here that *this situation does not need any explanation or comment on my part*: there was a flood and our house is a big mess. The same logic applies in the Kathy-Joseph interaction as Joseph hopes that showing a stack of papers on his desk will not require any additional comment or explanation on his part: He obviously has a lot of work, judging by the pile of papers lying on his desk.

When Fultner then writes, “Why is it not sufficient—and more accurate—merely to say that Joseph cites his workload *as a reason* to decline?” I would respond that I have no problem speaking in terms of reasons (and I actually use this terminology in the focus article; see also Cooren, 2010). However, I think that *just* speaking in terms of reasons is precisely the kind of reduction that the ventriloquial thesis is fighting against. A reason is, by definition, always a way to make something speak *for* or *to* something else. The workload is indeed a reason that Joseph invokes to decline Kathy’s invitation, but *invoking a reason precisely amounts to invoking a figure that is supposed to say something about the situation*. In this case, this workload he is talking about and showing to Kathy is supposed to *tell* her that indeed his declining her invitation is understandable/acceptable.

In other words, *reasons always are figures that we invoke, figures that are supposed to say the same thing we are saying*. So why shouldn’t we just speak in terms of reasons? Precisely because insisting on using these terms exclusively participates in the bifurcation/cut/separation that the ventriloquial thesis calls into question. Just speaking in terms of reasons is reassuring as it allows us to quietly reproduce the Cartesian divide between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, something that pragmatism helps us reject (see Peirce, 1877). *Reasons are one of the ways by which figures speak to and through us*.

A little later, Fultner (2014) then writes,

Moreover, to claim that Joseph and Kathy “are both depicted as *ventriloquizing* these figures and as *ventriloquized* by them” ([Cooren, 2014,] 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. (pp. 59-60)

This detour through legal issues is interesting and it is something I have also worked on (Cooren, 2015b), given the key role *making one speak* plays when judges, lawyers and prosecutors make articles of the law, precedents and facts say things (see also Baynahm, 1996; Pang 2005; Pascual, 2014; Pascual et al., 2013; Sullivan 2006, 2009, 2016). Fultner says that when she speaks or signs a form *for* or *on behalf of* her child, it is because he cannot legally speak for himself. I, of course, totally agree with that claim (and note incidentally that this can happen precisely because there is a law that says so and that people can ventriloquize it). However, when she then says, “it’s not clear whether I make my child say anything, much less whether he makes me speak,” I would then retort that speaking or signing *on his behalf* or *for him* precisely means that he is participating in this act (otherwise, I don’t know what “for” or “on behalf” means anymore).

For instance, let’s say that Barbara Fultner is signing a passport application on her son’s behalf. What does it mean to do that? It means that she can indeed be held accountable for what is declared in this application and not her son. No problem at all. But I think that everybody would agree that *it is her son’s application, not hers*. In other words, signing a passport application on her son’s behalf consists of making him declare things about himself, with the caveat that indeed he cannot be held responsible for these declarations about himself. Furthermore, her son can be said to make her say things to the extent that he is the one who needs a passport. She cares for him, which means that she has his interest in mind. To have his interest in mind precisely means that what leads her to do what she is doing—filling in and signing this application—also are *his* interests. In this sense, her son can be said to be not only the figure—the one who is made to say things—but also the ventriloquist—the one who indirectly makes her say and do things (through his interests, as recognized and translated by Fultner). This vacillation/oscillation is crucial, otherwise we remain in a divided world where the figures that are made to say things have no bearing on what is happening in the conversation or action.

When Fultner writes that, “Joseph’s workload cannot be held responsible for, say, keeping Joseph from the dinner,” she seems to equate action with responsibility, something that the example she just gave helps to deconstruct. For me, responsibility is not automatically/systematically/inevitably related to ventriloquism, precisely because acting is not automatically/systematically/inevitably related to responsibility. When a two-year-old breaks a vase, he is definitely doing something, but he cannot (normally) be held legally responsible for what he did. The same logic applies to workload: it *shows* that Joseph is indeed busy, but it cannot be held responsible for keeping Joseph from joining his friends for dinner. Taking responsibility, as I show in another article (Cooren, 2016), should be understood as a *decision*, an *action*, which means that Joseph should, of course, be held responsible for his decision. Ventriloquism, as I also show elsewhere (Cooren, 2010), is precisely a way to better understand this crucial aspect of responsibility, as it shows that it is a matter of decision that it always consists of *making ours* what others might have also done, a logic of *exappropriation* that Jacques Derrida (1994) had perfectly understood.

Fultner (2014) then writes,

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 intentionality 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.). (p. 60)

It would probably take me too much space here to fully respond to Fultner, but let me try to briefly address some of the points she is making. First about intentionality. She writes that “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” (Fultner, 2014, p. 60). For sure, speaking often implies a form of intentionality: If I am asking for the salt, it is usually because I want to get the salt. No problem with that. But why should we be forced to reduce telling something to an intentional act? For instance, when someone blushes, does not it *tell* his interlocutors something about a form of embarrassment that this person is experiencing? Of course, telling here does not mean producing articulated sounds, but it means communicating something, which is what this person is doing unintentionally.²

No need to linguistify anything, as I never claimed that the verbs “telling” or “saying” had to be understood linguistically. It is actually Fultner and Barnden who keep invoking this reduction to call the ventriloquial view into question. Using the words “telling,” “speaking” or “saying something” does not obscure “the different ways in which different constituents of our world may affect us (causally, inferentially, emotionally, etc.)” (Fultner, 2014, p. 60). On the contrary, it highlights the ventriloquial aspect of our relationship to the world in general, marking not only its intelligibility/comprehensibility, but also its agency, i.e., the fact that it makes a difference.

When Fultner (2014) writes:

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 intersubjectivity of communication and assimilates non-intentional causes or reasons to intentional agents. (pp. 60-61)

I cannot but respond that even human agents are not always intentional agents when they communicate (the case of blushing is, I think, rather clear). Where did I deny Kathy the status of interlocutor? I am still looking for the answer in my focus article. At no point does

² In any case, even when one utters words, these words may be telling something that the person did not intend to convey. For instance, I could congratulate a colleague on having worked in the same institution for thirty years to then realize that he understood what I said as being ironical and even insulting. For him, staying thirty years in the same institution was actually a mark of failure, as it proved that he had not been marketable enough to other institutions (for more examples, see Cooren, 2010).

the ventriloquial metaphor deny the intersubjective/dialogical nature of communication and at no point does it deny to human beings any form of intentionality (see Cooren, 2010).

This is why I do not understand why Habermas's view on dialogue and communication should be considered more powerful than the ventriloquial thesis. Habermas's world is a mute world, a world where only people speak to each other, trying 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" (Fultner, 2016, p. 63). In the world I live in, interactants might indeed be doing just that, but then (1) claims to truth should be reinterpreted as claims that facts express themselves when one speaks, (2) claims to normative rightness as claims that fairness, justice or legality speaks when one speaks, and (3) claims to sincerity as claims that one's beliefs/attitudes/opinions express themselves when one speaks. In other words, the ventriloquial thesis allows reinterpreting Habermas's theory while truly acknowledging its pragmatist roots, something that Habermas neglects to do. To further elaborate on this latter point, let us now consider the discussion note by Chris Russill.

Chris Russill

In his discussion note titled "Planetary pragmatism? A response to François Cooren," Chris Russill (2014) precisely explores these pragmatist roots by showing to what extent the ventriloquial thesis aligns with pragmatism. As he rightfully notes, two philosophical traditions can be identified when we speak about this intellectual movement: classical pragmatism, which has historically focused on scientific inquiry and experience (Peirce, James, Dewey) and what Russill calls the "revival of pragmatism," which, from the 1980s, essentially focused on language use and communication. Russill accurately notes that my work, as well as Craig's, is an attempt to "bridge the classical pragmatist emphasis on inquiry with the brilliant forays into communication theory facilitated by Bernstein, Habermas, Rorty, Carey and others" (p. 28).

By reminding us that William James's (1890) *Principles of Psychology* "connected mind to the *exigencies* of practical life" (Russill, 2014, p. 28, my italics), Russill precisely highlights the relational ontology that was implicitly defended by pragmatism from its outset. Charles Sanders Peirce's (1877) article titled "The Fixation of Belief" famously showed that our beliefs, opinions, or attitudes are constantly evaluated in the light of their practical consequences. This means that any inquiry should be understood as an attempt to fix beliefs and appease doubt when surprising facts occur. As a fallibilist, Peirce believed—and he was, of course, right to do so—that our habits, attitudes and beliefs can be questioned when what we believe is the case is *contradicted*, *disproven* or *refuted* by our experiences.

Both pragmatism and semiotics—two intellectual movements initiated by Peirce himself—thus invite us to acknowledge that the world is not a passive receptacle of our actions, but that it strikes or kicks back, so to speak, telling us things about itself (in this regard, see also Barad, 2005, an author Russill (2014) mentions in his note, who explicitly defends a relational ontology). Russill is therefore right when he notes that representatives of the revival of pragmatism—mainly Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas—unfortunately lost this key connection with the world by positioning language as a "distinctly human affair, whether it was a collection of mutable vocabularies creatively adjusted by culture-bound people (Rorty) or a biological inheritance that locked in during hominization (Habermas)" (p. 29). For Rorty

and Habermas, there is therefore a “priority of hermeneutic and interpretive activity” (p. 29), which we also (regrettably) find in *pragmatics*, a linguistic movement traditionally associated with questions of language use and communication (see Levinson, 1983; Huang, 2015). It can also be found, I would say, in Barnden’s and Fultner’s discussion notes.

Although I agree that John Dewey’s notion of situation sometimes tends to look too “broad and unstrained” as Russill points out, I interpret this broadness and unstrainedness as a way to highlight the eventful dimension of *any* situation. In other words, the term “situation” should, to some extent, be understood the same way as linguists, sociologists and anthropologists conceive of contexts, *except that contexts and situations should be assumed as materializing themselves in our dialogues and conversations*. Bertrand Russell (1939) was therefore right when he famously noted that Dewey’s notion of situation seems to encompass nothing “less than the whole universe” (Russell, 1939, p. 147). However, while Bertrand Russell meant that as a critique, we should, on the contrary, reinterpret this extensiveness as a *positive* feature of situations. Anything or anyone can indeed potentially invite itself/himself/herself in an interaction, whether we are talking of emotions, facts, collectives, persons, texts, ideologies, principles, predispositions, etc. What we have to do as analysts is precisely spot, discern or detect all the beings that manage to express/ventriloquize/materialize themselves when interactions take place. It should therefore come as no surprise that situations are potentially indeterminate, since their identification is precisely dependent on their eventfulness or haecceity.

On another note, Chris Russill also highlights three concerns that scholars might have vis-à-vis the cross-tradition dialogue that the ventriloquial thesis, following Craig (1999), is trying to stimulate. First, he points out that “pragmatism, a philosophy best known for its practical orientation, inspires a fiendishly abstract discussion, as a debate over different models of meta-theoretical debate is far removed from the initial abstractions of a first-order theory” (Russill, 2014, p. 32). Second, he mentions that scholars might accuse the ventriloquial version of this dialogue of “stacking the deck” to the advantage of its own theses, which indeed is the case. Third, he notes that “it isn’t clear why figuring the world in agentive terms is especially pressing for communication scholars, especially given that their authority and relevance tends to rest on elucidating the more immediate societal implications of communication” (p. 32).

To these concerns that Russill himself does not find especially serious, I would respond as follows. Regarding the first concern, it goes without saying that this dialogue is indeed abstract and that this could be considered a paradox, given the practical implications pragmatism claims to have in the “real world.” However, I would then note that the ventriloquial thesis has, over the years, been empirically illustrated through several analyses, something that, unfortunately, cannot always be said of my fellow pragmatists’ work. What I mean is that the ventriloquial approach to communication is not only a theory about how communication works, it is also a way to *analyze* communication, especially naturally occurring interactions (but not only that, I insist). So if I acknowledged that there is indeed a form of abstractness in the dialogue that Robert T. Craig initiated, I would contend that the positions I defend are all empirically illustrated by numerous fieldwork-based studies. These studies were completed, for instance, in various missions led by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) throughout the world (Cooren, 2010, 2015c; Cooren and Bencherki, 2010; Cooren and

Matte, 2010; Cooren and Sandler, 2014; Cooren et al., 2007, 2008, 2013), in the daily routines of a real estate agent in Manhattan (Cooren et al., 2005, 2012; Cooren and Fairhurst, 2009), in the judgment written by a judge from the Superior Court of Quebec (Cooren, 2015b), in the brainstorming sessions and discourse of a group of people involved in a creativity process (Cooren, 2015a; Martine et al., 2016), or even in the positioning of the infamous Nazi Adolf Eichmann in his 1961 trial in Jerusalem (Cooren, 2010, 2016).

Regarding the accusation of stacking the deck (the second concern ventriloquized by Russill), I, of course, recognize that this cross-tradition dialogue is reconstructed to the advantage of my own positions, as I strongly believe that the ventriloquial thesis allows us to address *what matters* to the seven traditions associated with the communication field. As I also point out in my response to Elizabeth Wilhoit (and to Robert T. Craig himself), I do not believe in a form of blissfully happy ecumenism where all the traditions would be right and where none of their respective tenets could be called into question (in other words, I do not believe in incommensurability, which might sound odd for a pragmatist, but I would contend, not odd at all to a Peircian pragmatist). What I propose is my way to ventriloquize them, which consists in recognizing, for each of them, some merits, while neglecting other aspects that I find problematic. I would encourage other scholars to take Craig's (1999) call seriously and try to engage in this dialogue, something that relatively few of them actually did, unfortunately.

As for the third concern (i.e., why figuring the world in agentive terms is especially pressing for communication scholars?), I would respond the same way Russill does at the end of his beautiful note, i.e., by talking, echoing Latour's (2013) work, about *planetary pragmatism*. In these times of ecological disaster, which now have a name, the *anthropocene*, it might be relevant to theoretically and analytically reconnect our conversations to the world we inhabit and evolve in. In other words, we have to stop to sanctimoniously speak about "social construction of reality" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) as if we were still in the 1960s, both theoretically and empirically (Endreß and Nicolae, 2016). No, we are in the 2010s and if Berger and Luckmann could *look* right with their constructive positions 50 years ago, the illusion cannot hold on anymore today. Human beings are not alone on the construction site!

Elizabeth Wilhoit (and Robert Craig)

With her discussion note titled "Ventriloquism's methodological scope," Elizabeth Wilhoit (2014) ends this deferred dialogue by questioning whether ventriloquism, as a theory tied to a scholarly tradition, can be considered an apt response to Robert T. Craig's (1999) call for a cross-tradition dialogue. Echoing the critique Craig (2015) himself addresses to ventriloquism, she points out "the impossibility of epistemological or ontological coherence across the field of communication" (Wilhoit, 2014, p. 45–46). In other words, she sides with Craig when he notes that

[A] unified theory of communication is not only unlikely in practice but would be undesirable from a practical standpoint (because it would sacrifice the heuristic potential of diverse communication models offering diverse perspectives on problems), [...] a constitutive metamodel of communication must acknowledge the "reflexive paradox": that no one constitutive model of communication can be exclusively true in principle. Cooren has not responded to those arguments (Craig, 2015, p. 46)

Although I never claimed that the ventriloquial thesis could be considered a unified theory of communication (that would be quite pretentious on my part!), I indeed claim that this thesis was at least trying to maintain “a certain ontological and epistemological coherence” (Cooren, 2012, p. 12), something that both Wilhoit and Craig noticed. For me, the condition of a cross-tradition dialogue is that we acknowledge and even respect the various perspectives each tradition represents *while trying to explore if they have anything to say to each other*. In other words, if the exercise just consists of acknowledging our differences, this might be a step in the right direction, but I do not think it is enough (and this is indeed where Wilhoit/Craig’s position and mine go their separate ways).

Having things to say to each other means that we try to explore if some compatibilities or passage points can be found between the various traditions, which is precisely what the ventriloquial thesis not only explores but also *claims to create*. Are we condemned to a dialogue of the deaf where we simply recognize that we agree to disagree on what communication consists of? I do not think we should be and I precisely think that the ventriloquial reinterpretation of pragmatism offers the condition of such a constructive dialogue. In response to Craig (2015)—and I presume in response to Wilhoit too—I would then reply that such a dialogue would *not* “sacrifice the heuristic potential of diverse communication models offering diverse perspectives on problems” (Wilhoit, 2014, p. 46).

My intention was never to replace the seven traditions with a unified theory called the ventriloquial thesis (see also Cooren 2012), but to demonstrate, through this thesis, that a dialogue was possible, a dialogue where a certain coherence between traditions can indeed be explored. To give up on this aspect would be like stopping the exploration of a potential coherence between, say, Bohr’s quantum mechanics and Einstein’s general relativity. If these two main ways to understand physics are really incompatible, it means that one of them is—or both are—wrong or incomplete, which is why they need to enter a dialogue with each other through various experiments or theoretical constructions (as they keep doing up to the present days).

As for the reflexive paradox (that no one constitutive model of communication can be exclusively true in principle), I definitely agree with this position and it is precisely for this reason that I took Craig’s call seriously. None of the seven traditions can be exclusively true in principle, since *they each focus on specific aspects of communication that matter to them*. In other words, I believe that what they say, each in its own specific way, can be true about aspects of communication that interests them. However, I also believe—and this is why they, I think, need to be in dialogue with each other—that their compatibility has to be explored. Otherwise this would amount to falling into a bad form of relativism: you have your truth, I have mine, we respect each other, but we have nothing to say to each other.

The ventriloquial thesis has, of course, its own limitations and it does not claim to be a “theory of everything” like the one Pickering (1995) dared to curiously propose. *It is a theory of communication that claims to be true about specific aspects of communication it focuses on. And it is also a theory that appears to respond to some designs specs that each tradition could address to anyone claiming to propose such a theory.*

In her note, Wilhoit (2014) also points out that given the specific epistemological/methodological commitments ventriloquism represents, it is unlikely that some traditions

recognize themselves in the way I portray them. Speaking of the sociopsychology paradigm, she writes,

Cooren ... tries to reconcile ventriloquism and sociopsychology by reframing causes and effects as issues of animation and agency, recognizing that “a plethora of agencies can be recognized as active in a given conversation, whether through a specific attitude that expresses itself at some point or through an emotion that appears to animate the discussion” (Cooren, 2012, p. 10). However, such a reinterpretation of sociopsychology seems unlikely to be adopted by scholars in this tradition, particularly for experimental researchers who work with the explicit goal of isolating variables to explain and predict communication phenomena. By choosing the epistemological and ontological aspects of each tradition that best fit into the ventriloquial metamodel (Craig, 2015), Cooren has overlooked some of the practical implications for scholarship of such an approach. Although the sociopsychological tradition *can* be made to align with ventriloquism, when one turns to methods as a reflection of a tradition’s epistemological commitments, it becomes more difficult to see each tradition aligning with Cooren’s understanding of ventriloquism as a metadiscourse. It is unlikely that sociopsychological scholars will conduct experiments or surveys to identify agencies in a given interaction. (pp. 46–47)

Two issues can be mentioned regarding what Wilhoit claims in this passage. First, I would point out that only the future will tell whether this reinterpretation of sociopsychology will be adopted by its representatives, as I clearly see no incompatibility, *in principle*, between the concept of animation and the ones of causality, variables and even statistical prediction. We are all animated/driven/moved by specific predispositions, which can be associated with cultural, personality or even genetic traits. Even if the methodologies mobilized to identify these sources of animation are different (conversation analysis vs. experiments/surveys), I do not see why this difference makes these two theories incompatible. As Wilhoit (2014) herself points out, “the sociopsychological tradition *can* be made to align with ventriloquism” (p. 46) and this is what matters to me at this point.

Second, when Wilhoit writes that, “it is unlikely that sociopsychological scholars will conduct experiments or surveys to identify agencies in a given interaction,” I would retort that they are already doing so, although they do not, of course, use the terminology I am mobilizing. As I repeatedly pointed out in my 2010 book on ventriloquism (cf. pp. 67, 173, 186), Milgram’s (1974) experiments on obedience are, for instance, absolutely compatible with the ventriloquial thesis I defend and Milgram himself uses a vocabulary—the one of *agentic shift*, for example—that appears attuned with my own positions on agency and animation.

Going beyond the question of compatibility with sociopsychology, Wilhoit (2014) also writes,

Rhetoric, for instance, does have a strong concern for language. However, rhetorical analysis also takes the art, strategy, and emotion of communication into account. Not all rhetoricians take the rather instrumental approach to language that CA [conversation analysis] requires and this difference is reflected in rhetorical methods. Similarly, the critical tradition recognizes that no language is value-free. Studying communication is never a matter of simply looking at how certain agents are made present in language because the language

itself has already been imbued with power, something that critical methodologies take into account. (p. 47)

While Wilhoit identifies the ventriloquial thesis with conversation analysis, I would point out that these two approaches differ from each other, and precisely with respect to the points Wilhoit is raising to criticize ventriloquism. Although the thesis I defend acknowledges important contributions that ethnomethodology and conversation analysis definitely made to the detailed study of interaction (reflexivity, indexicality, and accountability certainly being some of them), it also departs from these two approaches in the *decentering* of participants it operates. While conversation analysts and ethnomethodologists tend to be exclusively interested in what interactants do and how they do what they do in interaction (see Pomerantz and Fehr, 2011), the ventriloquial approach precisely acknowledges other forms of agency that indirectly participate in the constitution of a given situation.

This is why rhetoric, with its focus on “the art, strategy and emotion of communication” (Wilhoit, 2014, p. 47) does nicely complement what conversation analysis has to offer, precisely because this tradition is not caught in the same *stricture* conversation analysis tends to lock itself into. The ventriloquial thesis acknowledges this contribution by highlighting *everything that tends to make a difference in a given situation*, which includes, of course, the emotions and skills that ventriloquize themselves when people speak to each other (see Cooren, 2010, 2015c for several illustrations). What conversation analysis and ethnomethodology offer to rhetoric, in response, is a form of sensitiveness to interactivity and naturally occurring conversations, something that rhetoric does not tend to develop, unfortunately.

If we turn to critical theory, I would contend that the ventriloquial thesis is, to some extent, compatible with this tradition in that it does acknowledge that “language itself [is] imbued with power” (Wilhoit, 2014, p. 47). Studying how certain agents are *made present* in language is precisely a way to unveil this imbuelement. If there is indeed power in language—a position I, of course, completely agree with—it means, by definition, that the sources of this power must be *identifiable* in one way or another (in the form of repertoires, ideologies, registers, Discourses (with a big D), sources of authority, etc.). This is, incidentally, where critical theorists and conversation analysts/ethnomethodologists tend to depart from each other (see the famous debate between Emanuel Schegloff (1997) and Margeret Wetherell (1998)) and this is why ventriloquism is useful in this improbable dialogue between these two traditions.

Ventriloquism listens to critical theorists by acknowledging the differences these repertoires, registers, Discourses, ideologies, and other sources of authority concretely make in communication. However, it departs from these same theorists when this form of agency is associated with an almighty structure that comes from who knows where. In keeping with Latour’s (1986) positions, the ventriloquial thesis contends that *power is a matter of association*, that is, that we, as analysts, must be able to detect the other forms of agency—a specific Discourse or ideology, for instance—that ventriloquize/express/materialize themselves when people interact with each other. Power is a matter of association because power is about *making other agents speak* when we speak. This is the essence of ventriloquism and I think this is what makes it compatible with *what matters* to critical theorists.

A little later, Wilhoit (2014) writes,

A metamodel then cannot have assumptions or restrictions built into it, if it is to provide an open space of coexistence. As I have described, ventriloquism does not seem to meet this criterion. Although Cooren (2014) has shown what a ventriloquial view of pragmatism can highlight in each tradition, it does not truly open dialogue between the traditions. (p. 47)

To this, I would respond that assumptions or restrictions should be collectively examined and worked out. A dialogue between traditions is precisely a way to show, for instance, what conversation analysis can learn from rhetoric and what critical theory can learn from conversation analysis. Again, if the reaction is “I respect you, you respect me (which, by the way, often does not even happen!), but we have, in fact, nothing to really say to each other because our respective views are, anyway, incompatible,” I think it is unfortunately wrong to embark upon this line of thinking. It is wrong precisely because beyond what matters to each tradition, incompatibilities have to be examined and possibly—yes, I would go as far as saying this—*resolved* (a form of meliorism that certainly echoes John Dewey’s and William James’s philosophy). Otherwise, this would amount to giving up our commitment to the progression of knowledge in all its forms (humanistic, philosophical, scientific).

A truly open dialogue is precisely a dialogue where we can say to the other parties, “I think you are wrong regarding this question, and here is why,” something that Habermas would certainly categorize as an ideal speech situation, except that explaining “why” would, for me, amount to ventriloquizing aspects of communication that would precisely *show* why I might be right and why you might be wrong (see my response to Fultner regarding what reasons consist of from a ventriloquial viewpoint). There must be openness in principle, but this openness must not become a sort of “free for all” where everybody can be right even if their positions contradict each other.

In response to Wilhoit, I am thus in favor of diversity regarding the different ways ventriloquism could be explored, especially at the methodological level. At the end of her note, she highlights how the ventriloquial thesis has been productively reinterpreted and mobilized by scholars such as Jahn (2016), Koschmann and McDonald (2015) or even herself (Wilhoit and Kisselburgh, 2015). I know the quality of this work and there is no doubt in my mind that ventriloquism should not be exclusively explored through the detailed study of interaction (see, for instance, Cooren, 2015b). I definitely side with Wilhoit on this point, which is why I do not understand why she seems to imply that I would be as dogmatic as some conversation analysts, for whom there is no salvation outside the detailed study of interaction. As a scholar who repeatedly tried to reconcile *dissemination* with *dialogue*, as Peters (1999) would say, I think I cannot really be accused of this sin (see, for instance, Cooren, 2009, where I try to create the conditions of an improbable dialogue between Derrida and Garfinkel).

Conclusion (hoping that it will not be one...)

Beyond its intersubjective nature, ventriloquism is also about interobjectivity, as Latour (1996) would put it, that is, it claims that communicating with each other is also a matter of *making the world say things about itself*. In the case of this deferred exchange, this world was the world of language and communication, a world where ventriloquism itself plays, I

contend, a central role. This is, I think, the beauty of this thesis, as it allows speaking about its own claims in ventriloquial terms. In other words, it seems to pass the test of *performative contradiction*, which sometimes plagues various theories, especially the ones that have a relativist/relational tone.

The ventriloquial thesis is a *relational* thesis and the relativity it defends should, as I tried to show, be understood as the condition of its veridiction, i.e., its capacity to tell the truth and express the factuality of our world. Far from siding with the revivalists of pragmatism (Rorty and Habermas, to go quickly), it generally aligns with Karen Barad, Bruno Latour and others whose work continues to show that thinking in terms of relations is not incompatible with the meliorist dream of objectivity and truth. I hope that this dialogue was at least a step in that direction and I want to thank all the respondents for their generous contributions.

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