

## Ventriloquism as communicative music

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**Abstract.** This essay explicates connections between communication theory and François Cooren's discussion of ventriloquism. Cooren provides a theoretical and practical exposition of a situated and contextually shaped communicative agent. Ventriloquism offers a practical depiction of the limits of individualism, or unrestrained individual autonomy. Ventriloquism suggests that we live within sounds and voices that continually affect a communicator; one cannot confuse the influence of random and, at times, orchestrated sounds and voices with ownership grounded within a single communicative agent. Ventriloquism explicates everyday life as orchestrated by ongoing communicative music of sounds and voices.

**Keywords:** communication theory, ventriloquism, pragmatism, signification, metadiscourse

François Cooren (2014) grounds his work in the insights of Robert Craig's important 1999 essay concerning communication theory. Craig outlines seven traditions: rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, cybernetics, sociopsychology, sociocultural theory, and critical theory. Craig's task was not simply to differentiate the approaches, but to invite dialogue between and among them. Cooren enters this conversation with an emphasis on ventriloquism. He explicates Craig's work, which understands communication theory as a field, not as a discipline. Craig points to the importance of metadiscourse in which the first principle is to think communicatively about the world, with the second principle focused on communication itself. The significance of Craig's two principles is that he grounds communication within an ongoing commitment to content, with the first principle being discourse *about*.

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## **A pragmatic addition**

The response to Craig by Russill in 2004 and 2005 indicated that a tradition was absent in Craig's work—that of pragmatism. Specifically, Russill's discussion centered on whether or not Dewey's pragmatic model of democracy actually encourages dialogue between and among traditions. Cooren enters the conversation with a linking of the ventriloquism perspective to pragmatism. The ventriloquism standpoint assumes that communicative actors, in the words of Cooren, are also "passers" in that they take turns in the engagement of intelligible talk (p. 7). Ventriloquism is a thesis that frames a metatheory of pragmatism that permits us to understand how dialogues between and among different communities and traditions are possible. Of course, Cooren not only emphasizes the work of John Dewey but also that of William James and Charles Sanders Peirce. James considered Peirce the founder of pragmatism, indicating that Peirce coined the term.

Pragmatism understood as a metatheory or a metamodel permits Cooren to ask if it is possible for the ventriloquist perspective to illuminate how this dialogue transpires. How does one, from a perspective of ventriloquism, invite dialogue from the seven approaches detailed by Craig? Cooren wonders how we can bring together pragmatism and constitutive rhetoric that conveys matters of significance. The ventriloquism perspective assumes that constitutive activity is essential in meaning-making. In semiotics, the ventriloquism viewpoint presupposes that human beings are not the only speaking voices. Phenomenology permits insight into the things themselves, whether empirical or not. Ventriloquism lends clarity to such a willingness to understand as real that which one cannot necessarily kick, bite, or chew. Cybernetics responds to design and systems, and a ventriloquist thesis assumes that organizations provoke and propel participants. A sociopsychological perspective of ventriloquism recognizes the importance of attachment. Social cultural theory links well with ventriloquism's emphasis of expression. Finally, a critical theory of ventriloquism presupposes that there are multiple traditions that speak and they cannot be assimilated into one theory.

A ventriloquist view of pragmatism takes both an objective and subjective approach to rhetoric into account, uniting the conversations of Lloyd Bitzer and Richard E. Vatz. The ventriloquism orientation is a pragmatism that attempts to explain how the world works, reliant upon many of the insights of Bruno Latour (Cooren 2014, pp. 11, 22). Ventriloquism recognizes the constitutive nature of the human world not in the manner in which I constitute it, but rather in the mode through which it constitutes a social world. Ventriloquism presupposes that speaking is happening all around us, not just by people but also by semantic implications.

## **Situating ventriloquism**

Cooren's essay provides a thorough chart of the way in which he translates these seven traditions within the framework of ventriloquism (p. 16). The chart is worth reiterating and responding to. In it, he explicates clearly the connections between and among each of the seven traditions and his understanding of ventriloquism. Rhetoric involves "every situation [that] *prescribes* a fitting response" (p. 16). Ventriloquism is attentive to situations in that it must provide a fitting response, and as we prescribe something, we ventriloquize it. In

semiotics, we experience the world as speaking through icons, indexes, and symbols. A ventriloquial perspective again assumes that situations speak and dictate. Phenomenology takes us to the thing itself, to a world that is never silent or mute. From a ventriloquial perspective, all situations address us. Systems provide a systematic framework for understanding situations. Ventriloquism assumes that situations often reproduce themselves within systems. Psychosociology analyzes attachments. Ventriloquism indicates that situations define the significance of attachments. In sociocultural theory, situations reproduce through norms and habits that we cultivate. From a ventriloquist perspective, these values, norms, and habits communicate and participate in the shaping of what we are and do. A critical perspective indicates that no situation is value-free. From a ventriloquist outlook, interests emerge in all discourses.

If one attends carefully to the linguistic recurrence of Cooren's analysis, the term that is repetitively used is situation. Ventriloquism is responsive to situations that are shaped by sources far beyond the communicative agents themselves. The significance of this work resides, perhaps, in the reversal of whom we might consider the dummy in which ventriloquism displays itself. In typical terms, we would find the dummy held by a communicative agent in which the words are being placed in the mouth of this object by a human being who has practiced the skill of speaking with limited lip movement. Ventriloquism turns this scenario upon its head and frames the dummy as the communicative agent who thinks he or she is in total control.

Ventriloquism makes us, you and me, dummies in that we speak a constitutive rhetoric about icons, signs, and symbols that matter and that require us to be attentive to a fundamental reality—the world is greater than my voice, and the environment is never silent. Ventriloquism assumes the power of systems as they speak and reproduce themselves. The psychosociological attachments literally put words in our mouths, as do norms and values that tell us how to speak. Critical theory operates routinely in the background with the mantra that ventriloquism pragmatically and naturally assumes that all is biased. From rhetoric to semiotics to phenomenological, cybernetic, psychosocial, sociocultural, and critical traditions, we, like human dummies, speak with the assumption that we are in control. We are partially in control, and perhaps more so when we recognize that ventriloquism is a pragmatic reality of how human beings function in their everyday lives.

### **Echoes of everyday signification**

To illustrate the profundity and simple elegance of ventriloquism, I ask the reader to consider the following story that asks basic questions. 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? When my son was quite young, he asked me an odd question—would I always be his friend. My response came quickly, as if somehow I had not reflected upon it. I uttered the following response to my son: “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.” I walked away from that conversation right before my son was to go to sleep, and I

asked myself one repetitive question during the remainder of the evening. From where did that response come? It was not something I had thought of in advance, and right before I turned off the lights for the ending of my evening, the obvious came to me. Ventriloquism—yes. I was speaking the words of my father, and now those words emerged from me for my son.

Much of what we assume is situated uniquely in our own agency is a form of ventriloquism that propels us into communicative action in a given moment. My final comments are on theory. I understand communication theories as stories that give us insight into the human condition. I do not frame communication theories as modernist universal principles of truth that will curtail the voice of any theory that has come before or will come after. Therefore, my reaction to ventriloquism is one of interest and intellectual excitement. Where will it take us? I have no need to disagree with it nor do I have the impulse to argue that ventriloquism is the end of theory in communication. The implications of this story remind us that others speak, that the future speaks, that the past has a voice as do the places and objects around us. Such a conceptual account sounds quite powerful in a postmodern context, where we have decentered the communicative agent. Ventriloquism has the power of a director of an orchestra. The director has influence, but without the parts, there is no music. Ventriloquism reminds us of the communicative music that surrounds us.

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