



What language is doing: Initiating a dialogue with Judith Bridges

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Abstract. This article is meant to initiate a dialogue with Judith Bridges about the performativity of language. By analyzing how social media users talk about what language is doing, especially when these users accuse someone of whitesplaining, mansplaining, or other forms of [X]-splaining, I show that they implicitly acknowledge what has been called elsewhere the ventriloquial dimension of communication. By ventriloquation, I mean that whenever we speak, write or, more generally, communicate, an act of delegation always takes place, which means that what is said, written or communicated can be presented by others as *making us say things* that we had not necessarily anticipated. This form of delegation, which is typical of the episodes analyzed by Bridges and that I identify as a form of downstream ventriloquation, is contrasted with upstream forms of ventriloquation, that is ventriloquations by which other actors are deemed as expressing themselves through what is being said or, more generally, communicated. I believe that the identification of these two forms of ventriloquation can help us analyze the performativity of language that interests Bridges.

Keywords: Linguaging, ventriloquation, resemiotization, entextualization, enregisterment, authority

“Explaining *-splain*” – a wonderful contribution by Judith Bridges (2021) gives me an opportunity to initiate a dialogue with her about the performativity of language. Bridges indeed mentions that she is interested in “how social media users talk about *what language is doing*” (p. 1, my italics), an expression that she repeatedly uses (cf. pp. 2, 3, 6, 20) throughout her article. Although this ascription of a doing to language could be understood metaphorically (for instance, by saying that language does not *really* do anything and that this is just a “way of speaking” that does not completely reflect a real form of agency on language’s part), I would like to take this

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assertion seriously, an assertion she attributes to social media users, knowing anyway that there is always a claim for truth in *any* metaphorical expression.

What does it mean indeed to say that language is doing something? It means that we recognize that what people utter or write (or more generally communicate), that is, the signs they use to express themselves, are themselves doing something, i.e., *making a difference* in a given situation. In other words, communicating is always, whether we like it or not, an act of *delegation* by which the signs we produce – whether these signs are iconic, indexical or symbolic, in the Peircian sense of these terms (Peirce, 1991) – become themselves agents communicating something on our behalf, in our name, or for us (Cooren, 2010, 2020). As speakers, writers or communicators, we might sometimes be surprised by what our expressions make us say, but this phenomenon of delegation constitutes, I believe, the sine qua non condition of *any* act of communication (Caronia and Cooren, 2013).

Although Bridges (2021) never explicitly acknowledges this intractable aspect of communication (maybe because it is so obvious to her), I think that the recognition of this delegative character is important to fully understand the phenomenon of digital vigilantism, what she aptly proposes to call *digilantism*, which indeed characterizes the “call-out culture” of our social media interactions.¹ What do Internet users indeed do when they denounce certain ways of speaking as being inappropriate or wrong? They focus on what someone just said or wrote by denouncing it as expressing a prejudice against or even hostility toward a certain group of people (a form of racism, sexism, classism, etc.). Whether this person meant it that way or not (and this is a key aspect of my point), this is indeed what their *linguaging* is doing, according to those accusers.

As we know, this accusation often goes a little further, as the target is frequently not restricted to the pronounced or written words themselves, but also includes the people who allegedly produced them. These persons can indeed be themselves accused of *coming across* as being prejudiced against or hostile towards a certain group of people. In this case, a distinction appears, however, to be maintained as the offenders are not *necessarily* accused of being themselves prejudiced or hostile. They are accused of *sounding* as such, so to speak. This implicit distinction appears important as it can be seen as a way to minimally protect someone’s positive face (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). The accusation could then look like this: “You might not be racist, sexist or classist yourself, but you definitely sound like one, so please be careful!”

But we also know, and Bridges’ (2021) analyses show this very nicely, that this distinction can also be completely dropped, as accusers can quickly extend the accusation of racism, sexism, classism and any other [X-]ism to the alleged offenders themselves. In this case, the prejudice or hostility that is expressed in the offenders’ words become the offender’s *own* prejudice and hostility. This is, for instance, what is happening with women who are called Karens, “an identity associated with a type of entitled complaining done by middle class (often middle-aged) White women” (p. 5). A Karen is not only a White woman who comes across as entitled; as pointed out by Bridges, she is supposed to “*feel* entitled to getting her way, even at the expense of others” (p. 5, my italics). In this specific case, this person’s linguaging is therefore envisaged

¹ While much of the attention of Bridges’ (2021) article is directed toward left-wing vigilantism against expressions of racism, sexism and other excluding attitudes, other forms of digilantism exist on the other side of the political spectrum, especially when it comes to nationalism.

as expressing a *sense* of entitlement that she is accused of *having* because of the status she *feels* she has as a White person. From *coming across* as being racist, sexist, classist, etc. to being accused of *being* racist, sexist, classist, etc., the line can indeed be very thin even if it can remain an important one.

These processes of resemiotization (Iedema, 2003) or entextualization (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) that Bridges (2021) analyzes in her article can thus be compared with what I have called elsewhere a sort of ventriloquation (Bartesaghi, 2014; Cooren, 2010; Nathues et al., 2021). By ventriloquation, I mean the process by which someone or something makes someone or something else say or do something, a phenomenon that is constitutive, in my opinion, of *any* act of communication. Given the delegative character of communication, anything that we say, write or, more generally, communicate can indeed be envisaged as *making us say things*, that is, *ventriloquizing* us. Sometimes, these signs make us say things that we intended to say (for instance, someone is asking her interlocutor to pass her the salt and this person does pass her the salt), but sometimes they can also, as we know, *betray* us (for instance, someone thought that she was just commenting on the disorderliness of an apartment, but what we said is heard as a reproach).

This type of ventriloquation is what has been called elsewhere (Cooren, 2010, 2014a, 2014b, 2020) a form of *downstream* ventriloquation to the extent that it is the signs we produce – and can be considered down the stream of communication – that are deemed as making us say something. However, there is another form of ventriloquation, that I call *upstream* ventriloquation,² which corresponds to the various things or persons that are *made to say things* through what we are saying. This is, for instance, what happens when someone claims that facts speak for themselves, invokes specific protocols, or more obviously, acts as a spokesperson for an organization. In all these cases, there is a form of upstream ventriloquation to the extent that facts, protocols or an organization are respectively presented as *speaking through* the person who is ventriloquizing them, that is, making them say things.

However, upstream ventriloquation is also at stake in less obvious circumstances. For instance, any time we say something about a situation, whether it is the weather (“It’s so sunny today!”), a colleague of ours (“Pedro looks really tired”) or a war taking place in a given part of the world (“The situation in Ukraine is catastrophic”), ventriloquation can be identified to the extent that these situations can be said to *express themselves* through what is being said. In other words, analyzing what people say from a ventriloquial viewpoint consists of acknowledging not only what these people are doing in saying something (e.g., declaring something about the weather, their colleague Pedro or the war in Ukraine), but also what is expressing itself *through* what is being said (e.g., the sunniness of the weather, Pedro’s apparent fatigue, and the catastrophic character of the situation in Ukraine are all expressing themselves in what is being said).

The ventriloquial thesis thus proposes to achieve a reversal of perspective that has, to my knowledge, never been operated in linguistic and conversation analyses before. While these

² As we know, upstream means “in the opposite direction from that in which a stream or river flows; nearer to the source” while downstream means “in the direction in which a stream or river flows” (Oxford Dictionary). If we compare an act of communication to a stream, downstream ventriloquation thus refers to the act that consists of ventriloquizing someone or something through the stream of signs that she, he or it is producing. In contrast, upstream ventriloquation refers to the act that consists of acknowledging what happens in the opposite direction, that is, identifying who or what is made to say things through what is being said or written.

perspectives always tend to limit their analyses to what human participants and only human participants are saying and doing in various situations (à la speech act theory, if you will), a ventriloquial approach shows that various elements of these situations are, in fact, *also* expressing themselves when interactions are taking place. For instance, whenever someone is saying, “It’s so sunny today!” it is, to a large extent, the sunniness of the weather that is expressing itself through this declaration. In other words, this person is not only an *actor* (she is definitely declaring something about the weather), but she is also what could be called a *passer*, that is, a *medium* through whom other things – here, the weather – express themselves. The sunniness of the weather can thus be said to express itself not only through the heat it communicates to us, but also, and this is a crucial point, through what is said about it.

These phenomena of ventriloquation (whether upstream or downstream) are, I believe, constantly made visible in the interactions that Bridges analyzes because these interactions correspond to what could be typically called a form of metacommunication. By metacommunication, I mean situations where communication is problematized by the participants themselves. As long as things go smoothly, the phenomena of ventriloquation (which are, as already mentioned, constitutive of *any* act of communication) can indeed remain relatively invisible to the analysts and the participants. However, it is when something does not work as planned that the agency of intermediaries – here, the texts written by the social media users – is revealed, as pointed out by Callon (1986) and Latour (1996) a long time ago.

As an illustration, let’s look at the following interaction where the (in)famous altercation between Christian Cooper (a birdwatcher) and Melody Cooper (a dog owner) in New York City’s Central Park is commented on by three social media users:

- 1 @Charlie: Calling the NYPD to a seemingly unarmed and distant person in one of the
- 2 busiest parks in the country is extremely unlikely to get anyone hurt [...] It’s
- 3 not “calling a hit”
- 4 Reply 1: You’re being deliberately obtuse. I am not even in America, yet I know the
- 5 amount of danger she was going to put that guy in. Don’t come here trying to
- 6 [...] whitesplain this. This is a touchy subject. Read an article or two about this
- 7 Reply 2: Please do not whitesplain or mansplain

(Bridges, 2021, p. 15)

From a ventriloquial perspective, we can see several things happening here. First, it is noteworthy that @Charlie is implicitly *invoking* a sort of general principle in his intervention (“Calling the NYPD to a seemingly unarmed and distant person in one of the busiest parks in the country is extremely unlikely to get anyone hurt” (lines 1–2)). This is a principle to the extent that it is indeed supposed to apply to many different situations, including, according to this contributor, the interaction between Melody and Christian Cooper.

@Charlie can thus be said to be implicitly *ventriloquizing* this principle to the extent that he is *making it say* that what Melody Cooper (the alleged Karen) was doing during this altercation was relatively harmless. Interestingly, this upstream ventriloquation of a general principle is what allows him to then reject a possible way Melody Cooper could be herself ventriloquized by others. By saying “It’s not ‘calling a hit’” (lines 2–3), he is indeed calling into question any attempt that would consist of *making her look like* someone who would be putting someone else’s life in danger (a form of downstream ventriloquation).

If we now look at the first reply that @Charlie’s intervention prompted, we can observe how various forms of ventriloquation are also at stake. “You’re being deliberately obtuse” (line 4) is interesting as it appears to both (1) make him *come across as* and (2) present him as *being* obtuse. By specifying that he is *deliberately* obtuse, the author of reply 1 is indeed accusing @Charlie of willingly saying something stupid or insensitive. In this case, “being obtuse” is not supposed to be heard as an accusation that would essentialize him as being always this way. In this reply, @Charlie thus *becomes* someone who is acting in bad faith by purposely acting like someone who *sounds* obtuse (downstream ventriloquation). In other words, this is how he is being ventriloquized at this point, a ventriloquation that maintains the distinction between coming across as X (here, obtuse) and actually being X.

In what follows, we see that the author of reply 1 then positions herself as someone who is “not even in America” (line 4), but who yet “know[s] the amount of danger [Melody Cooper] was going to put [Christian Cooper] in” (lines 4–5). *Speaking as* is a form of upstream ventriloquation, as it consists of saying that it is not only *she* who is now expressing herself but *also* a person who does not live in the United States, a person that she happens to be. This ventriloquation thus allows this commenter to lend weight to her position, as she implies that everybody, including people who live outside the US, *know* that what Melody Cooper did could have put Christian Cooper in serious danger³. The accusation of “being deliberately obtuse” (line 4) is therefore justified by what is indirectly presented as a sort of commonplace: @Charlie, you know, as everyone does, that this danger was real.

Following this justification, we then see how the accusation of whitesplaining comes about: “Don’t come here trying to [...] whitesplain this. This is a touchy subject. Read an article or two about this” (lines 5–6). Again, this accusation can be seen as a form of downstream ventriloquation to the extent it consists of portraying what @Charlie just said or is about to say later as an “explanation from White speakers to racially marked hearers on race-related topics” (Bridges, 2021, p. 4). In other words, downstream ventriloquation is also at stake when we observe what someone’s words become in another person’s mouth, which is precisely what is happening here. In this case, this ventriloquation goes even further as the accusation of whitesplaining consists of positioning @Charlie as *speaking as* a White condescending individual (upstream ventriloquation). If we add to this portrait the one that is indirectly made by the author of Reply 2, we then even have a White condescending *man*, given the additional accusation of mansplaining.

In general, the accusation of [X]-splaining helps us understand that ventriloquation can sometimes consist of making someone *not only* (1) say something (in this case, talking about a topic that concerns non-X), but *also* (2) represent how (some?) Xs, a category that the person is presented as belonging to, speak more generally, whether these Xs are men (mansplain), White (whitesplain), thin (thinsplain), rich (richsplain), etc. As we know, the art of ventriloquism not only consists of throwing one’s voice in such a way that it sounds as if it were coming from a dummy’s mouth, it also consists of making the puppet come across as having some specific attitudes, attributes or personality, which are supposed to be distinctive features of this character

³ Interestingly, we could also note that this ventriloquation also risks *undermining* this commenter’s position. A reply from a potential antagonist along the lines of: “You don’t even live in the US, so you clearly don’t know what you’re talking about” almost suggests itself. This shows that ventriloquation is always a risky business, as is any form of invocation.

(oftentimes, in ventriloquists' shows, the dummies are indeed portrayed as sly, tricky or mischievous, which is meant to present the ventriloquist as being ridiculed and outsmarted by her puppet).

The authors of replies 1 and 2 are therefore putting words in @Charlie's mouth (whitesplaining and mansplaining is what you are doing right now, which I identify as a form of downstream ventriloquation), but in doing so, they also *highlight* specific traits that @Charlie and his interlocutors are supposed to embody/express and could have otherwise remained invisible (upstream ventriloquation). Whitesplaining and mansplaining indeed function like a sort of package deal: if you are accused of whitesplaining or mansplaining (downstream ventriloquation), it means, by definition, that you sound respectively as a condescending White person or a condescending man (upstream ventriloquation). Not only that, it also means that the persons you are talking to (who happen to be the persons who are now accusing you) are themselves respectively other-than-White or other-than-men. This form of ventriloquation thus amounts to staging an *interactional scene* where a specific category of people (men, white people, rich people, thin people, etc.) are talking condescendingly to people who don't belong to this category (other-than-men, other-than-White, other-than-rich, other-than-thin, etc.).

The accusation of [X]-splain can thus indeed be seen as a form of *enregisterment* (Agha, 2007; Bridges, 2021) to the extent that the object of this denunciation, i.e., what has just been said, is retrospectively presented as belonging to a specific register or repertoire that expresses itself and categorizes a certain type of speakers or category of people (X) when they happen to speak to people who don't belong to this category (non-X), especially about topics that directly concern non-Xs. As it is often the case in disputes or disagreements, we therefore see how the alleged [X]-splainers retrospectively discover what they were allegedly doing without necessarily knowing it, a discovery that they can, of course, reject and contest.

Although this form of downstream ventriloquation can rightly be seen as a form of delegitimization, it is, as Bridges (2021) rightly points out, a way for non-Xs, who have been historically delegitimized, to disarm the [X]-splainers. While these Xs implicitly feel legitimized to explain things that directly concern non-Xs, non-Xs explicitly question this legitimacy, which allows them to attempt to reappropriate an epistemic authority (Heritage and Raymond, 2005) that had been historically denied from them. A certain violence is at stake, for sure, but this violence appears at least proportionate to the one that has silently delegitimized non-Xs for a very long time.

While ventriloquist shows are often characterized by their eventfulness (as the dummy is meant to say things that are supposed to surprise the ventriloquist and her audience), we see that this ventriloquation is supposed to highlight the relatively mundane and common character of what is being said. A sort of *double ventriloquation* is indeed at stake here: non-Xs ventriloquize Xs, but in doing so, they also portray Xs as the mouthpieces of registers and repertoires that allegedly and repeatedly express themselves through them. If interlocutors are actors, they are also, as we already saw, *passers*, that is, ideologies (through the form of habits, registers or repertoires) speak *through* them and it is this ideology that non-Xs try to rightfully denounce.

If we can say that the sunniness of the weather is expressing itself whenever someone says "It's so sunny today!", we could also point out that the persons who denounce these forms of [X]-splaining *eo ipso* show that condescending/patronizing registers typically express themselves in these situations. Through these accusations, Xs are therefore reduced to puppets

that keep expressing a form of domination, a domination that, according to these accusers, should be rightfully called into question. If language is indeed doing something, it might be because a lot of things constantly ventriloquize themselves in what we speak. This is what non-Xs metapragmatically identify in their accusations. And this is what Bridges (2021) helps us better understand in her beautiful article.

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