

Ventriloquism's methodological scope

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Abstract. In this response to Cooren (2014), I question whether a theory tied to a scholarly tradition with strong epistemological and methodological commitments can in fact be a response to Craig's (1999) call for dialogue between communication traditions. Ventriloquism originated in the Montréal School of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO), a field of study that understands organizations and organizing to be the result of interaction. Because of this epistemology, CCO scholars use conversation analysis (CA) as their primary method. Although Cooren has presented ventriloquism as a means to unify the field, it seems difficult to imagine other research methodologies being adopted into such a vision.

Keywords: ventriloquism, methodology, epistemology, communicative constitution of organizations

By presenting ventriloquism as a pragmatic metadiscourse to study communication and create a conversation between communication traditions, Cooren (2014) has responded to ongoing debates about the nature of communication as a field (Craig, 1999; Russill, 2007). In doing this, Cooren has taken on a difficult task to which almost no scholars have responded (Craig, 2007). However, Cooren's response highlights specific aspects of each communication tradition so they align with the ontological and epistemological commitments of ventriloquism, resulting in a more unified than dialogic metamodel (Craig, 2015). This metamodel contrasts with Craig's (1999) understanding that communication traditions should be connected by dialogue about the nature of communication, rather than epistemological unity.

In this note, I extend Craig's (2015) critique to address practical problems of methodology as an indication of the impossibility of epistemological or ontological coherence across the

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field of communication. My primary concern with Cooren's proposal of a pragmatic understanding of ventriloquism as communication metadiscourse is how to reconcile the variety of epistemologies and resulting methodologies that exist within communication scholarship. Although Cooren admits some of these difficulties, I question how effective ventriloquism might be for uniting communication theory as a field when it is tied to a tradition that has been fairly rigid in its scope and acceptable methodologies.

Ventriloquism, CCO, and methodology

Ventriloquism (as way of understanding communication) originated in the Montréal School of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO). The Montréal School is one approach to the thesis that communication constitutes organizations (Brummans et al., 2014). The Montréal School has specific epistemological and resulting methodological commitments that make ventriloquism a surprising choice as a metadiscourse that can create dialogue between all traditions of communication. Scholarship in this tradition understands organizations as the product of text (the words and phrases from which speech is built) and conversation (the shared interaction through language of the people who compose an organization) (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). To do this, Montréal School scholars use conversation analysis (CA) to examine how organizations are actually made present in actual interactions (e.g., Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008; Taylor & Robichaud, 2004; Vásquez & Cooren, 2013). Ontologically, Montréal School CCO is committed to interaction as the basis of organizing. Epistemologically, this results in an understanding that knowledge about organizations and organizing comes primarily from studying interactions (although in some cases, organizations can be studied from the top down, starting with the organization as a whole) (Brummans et al., 2014). CCO takes seriously that words do things (Austin, 1962) and as a result, the study of organizational communication needs to look at the words themselves and what they do (Taylor & Van Every, 2000), resulting in CA as CCO's method of choice.

In proposing ventriloquism as a way to create dialogue between the seven traditions then, these origins and commitments are not far away. Although Cooren (2014) presented ventriloquism as a broader theory than elsewhere, particularly by expanding it beyond organizational contexts (e.g., Cooren, 2010), it remains a theory with specific commitments about knowledge, and therefore methods. Cooren (2012, 2014) has acknowledged this problem of methodology to a certain extent when it comes to the fifth of the traditions he discusses following Craig (1999), sociopsychology, a tradition with vastly different understandings of method from ventriloquism. Cooren deals with the issue by having sociopsychology focus on "what seems to *matter* to its representatives in terms of communicative constitutiveness" (Cooren, 2012, p. 9). Cooren then 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.

Beyond sociopsychology (the tradition that likely has the clearest methodological-epistemological differences from ventriloquism and its CCO home), other traditions have similar conflicts. 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 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.

This lack of possibility for multiple epistemologies and methodologies within Cooren's approach is problematic following Craig's (1999) model. Craig (1999) proposed two conditions for a dialogue between fields. The first in particular requires more openness than ventriloquism provides. Craig (1999) wrote that a constitutive model of communication is a metamodel, or a space that allows different theoretical traditions to interact and "pictures models of communication as different ways of constituting the communication process symbolically for particular purposes" (p. 127). 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.

Towards methodological diversity for ventriloquism

The difficulty of solving this problem is that there can never be a neutral metamodel (Craig, 2007; 2015). Any metadiscourse or metamodel will always bring certain commitments to the discussion. However, given the "paradox of pluralism," the very nature of a metamodel means that it acknowledges its position as only one of many possible models of communication (Craig, 2007). The commitments that a metamodel brings should then be the starting point for discussion and dialogue, not a forced ontological-epistemological unity. Although Cooren (2012) has suggested that this coherence is important, it does take away from the dialogical goals of a communication metamodel (Craig, 1999; 2015). And, as I have noted here, it seems difficult to address practical issues like varied methodologies within such a vision of the field

Still, a solution has begun to develop. Despite the seeming lack of epistemological and therefore methodological openness in Cooren's (2012; 2014) metamodel, there is an emerging body of research that has started dialogue across the field from the other direction. Several scholars (not directly affiliated with the Montréal School) doing CCO research with ventriloquism or related concepts, have begun to produce empirical scholarship with

methods other than CA (e.g., Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012; Jahn, in press; Koschmann & McDonald, 2015; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015). Where Cooren (2012; 2014) has reinterpreted each tradition in light of ventriloquism, these scholars have reinterpreted ventriloquism (or related theories) in light of their tradition and its accompanying epistemological and methodological commitments. Koschmann and McDonald (2015), for instance, used interviews and observations to demonstrate how organizational rituals make power present. They justified this approach by arguing that they “do not *demonstrate* communicative constitution, but rather *presuppose* it as a theoretical foundation,” thereby using and building upon CCO concepts without analyzing actual communication interactions through a method like CA (p. 251).

Such a response demonstrates the possibilities for dialogue around ventriloquism, but does not seem to align with either the ventriloquial metamodel as Cooren (2012; 2014) has proposed it or practical enactment of ventriloquism and related CCO theories. As a scholar using CCO and ventriloquism as guiding theories, but methods other than CA, I can speak to the challenges of the review process and the number of times I have had reviewers take issue with the fact that I used CCO theories with methods other than CA, claiming that showing how organizing takes place through interaction is essential for CCO research. To truly answer Craig's (1999) call, the scholars who have a stake in these theories need to be open to dialogue about other ways of understanding and applying ventriloquism. The above studies demonstrate that this is possible, but it entails understanding ventriloquism not as an absolute theory to unify the field, but as an invitation to dialogue that also allows each tradition to reinterpret ventriloquism.

To conclude, I do acknowledge that ventriloquism (and its pragmatic interpretation) have the potential to create dialogue in the field of communication as demonstrated by recent studies that have re-interpreted ventriloquism and related theories through different methodologies and theories. However, Cooren's (2012; 2014) current deployment of ventriloquism as a metadiscourse tries to force an epistemological-ontological coherence between traditions rather than opening dialogue (Craig, 2015). I suggest that it will be through research beginning in each tradition with different methods using ventriloquism and its interpretation of pragmatism as a constitutive metamodel that dialogue will truly emerge and ventriloquism's epistemological and methodological origins will be decentered.

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