

Preface

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Pages xiii–xv of

Action and Agency in Dialogue: Passion, incarnation and ventriloquism

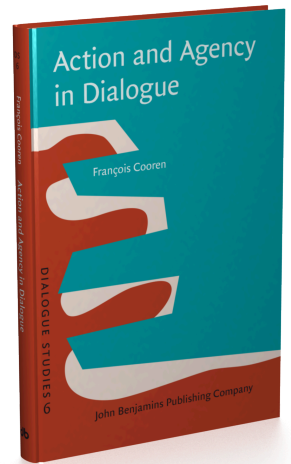
François Cooren

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FOREWORD

Who is making the dummy speak?

Bruno Latour
Sciences Po

François Cooren has been made to speak about ventriloquism by a voice that has come from somewhere else and that he is not quite sure of mastering completely since *it* speaks in a strange idiom and make him utter things he, François, did *not* want to say.

No, I mean François Cooren has written here a book about speech act theory in which, with complete mastery, he leads the reader through a vast literature to demonstrate that when “we” speak many other voices are speaking as well.

No, no, no: largely influenced by ethnomethodology, speech act theory, Derridian philosophy, organization studies, actor-network theory, and his wife and kids... plus quite a bit of field work in Africa – a place ideally suited to hear voices and be manipulated by countless fetishes – a fictional character called “François Cooren”, apparently professor of communication in Montreal, tries to wrestle with all those multiple agents to destroy, one after another, all the concepts dear to the heart of communication specialists: action, voice, agency, interaction, information and, of course, communication.

Like many specialists of communication studies, François Cooren has been puzzled by the centrality given to the common place idea of one human speaking agent interacting in a dialog with another human speaking agent. To be sure, the time seems far removed when those two interacting humans could not exchange with one another anything more meaningful than statements of facts about cats, mugs, mats and black swans. Thanks to Austin and Searle, it is now clear that those statements of facts, far from offering a useful base line for judging all other forms of speech, are so rare that they probably have never been entertained except in books of formal logic (where they have been mercifully replaced by *ps* and *qs* anyway). And thanks to science studies (a field that Cooren has learned to cross over skillfully with speech act theory), we have learned that it is certainly *not* in science that we could find cases of “purely factual” referential statement. There is indeed reference and objectivity in scientific practice, but it is obtained through

an immensely more complex set of “deambulations” as William James said, or “choreography” as Ludwick Fleck proposed to say, than what passed, earlier on, for statements of facts.

And yet, is it not very strange that so many linguists and so many socio-linguists, even when they have absorbed the multiplicity of speech acts, remain so committed to the idea that all of them have the same origin, namely, a unified speaking *human* subject? The plurality of speech acts has not led them to pluralize the agent who remains firmly in charge when uttering the spoken words. Cooren’s book aims at pushing the puzzle further and to add to the multiplicity of speech acts the multiplicity of agencies making the human agent speak. In his able hands, speech act theory shifts from a theory of a human speaking *actor* to the theory of what *makes* the agent *speak and act*. After all, if it is possible “to do things with words”, it is even truer that many *things* make us *do* words... Actually, it is the conceit of an agent in command which seems now as outdated as the idea of the Sun turning around the Earth.

Cooren’s solution is to abandon entirely the notion of a dialogue where two humans agents *face* one another, and to follow instead the *drift* of their common intertwined actions which are simultaneously behind and ahead of them. What he calls moving “upstream” and “downstream” of conversation – meticulously reconstructed according to the techniques of conversation analysts.

But a stream of what? Conversation? Not exactly, since a tiny fraction only seems to be carried by sentences. Action? Not quite, even though the word is often used, especially by pragmatists, to describe what people do when they interact. Interaction? Not at all, since this would imply that we know in advance *how many* agents are present in the dialogue. Let’s say that it is a flow of agencies that are either making us say things (upstream) or that we make do things (downstream). Such is the phenomenon for which Cooren has chosen the unusual metaphor of ventriloquism.

I am not completely convinced that this minor form of entertainment captures exactly what Cooren has in mind (but having “a thing in mind” is itself an even odder metaphor...). Ventriloquism is a highly mastered art form when there is no hesitation on the part of the viewer that she is being deceived – and this is precisely where the pleasure comes from. However what Cooren wishes to point out, is that the flow of agents and agencies in which we swim, float, drift or sometimes drown, is not mastered at all, even when, as we say in French, we try, before saying anything, “to turn six times our tongue in our mouth”. What is important in order to understand this book, is that it is not about a flow of discourse, but a flow of *characters* with their own ontology and their own weight, each distributing differently the powers to speak or to silence.

Reading the book, you begin to move your attention away from speech toward the *figures* of speech. And then, an even stranger thing happens: the very notion of “figures of speech” reverses itself and becomes *literal*: we are being acted upon by those invisible entities that “haunt” us and populate (or even crowd) the interactions. At this point, ventriloquism is inverted: we, the human subjects, are the *dummies* toward which other entities are projecting their real voices *as if* they were coming *from us*. The creatures who are carried out by the flow have the strange ability to speak through their bellies – near which we sit, it seems, so that we end up being manipulated by those creatures as if speech was coming out of our own mouths... All the studies of metaphor, of story-telling, or staging arguments are put upside down. We are spoken or silenced by others, by *aliens*, toward which we should direct our attention if we want to understand what make us act or speak. What Marx tried to do with his notion of fetishism is here inverted once again – back on its feet...

No doubt that linguists had considerably simplified their job: instead of interviewing “*vents*” (the technical term, apparently, in the art of ventriloquism to designate the real performers) they had limited themselves to interview the dummies! And the socio-linguists have been just as timid: they have added other speakers without realizing that adding dummies to dummies still does not help to uncover the real sources of speech... Even ethnomethodologists (an influence as important to Cooren as his beloved Derrida) have held a much too restricted view of who acts in an interaction: the specters, phantoms, monsters have to be granted much more agency than what has been allowed until now. When Garfinkel took great care of not treating social actors as “cultural dopes”, little could he envisage that Cooren would now say that he has confused dummies with the *real speech-actors*: those who make the dummy speak and articulate. And those creatures in no way resemble the old familiar figures of society, system, politics, discourse and structure because speech is now distributed among too many entities to detect their exact origin points. A totally new landscape is opened to inquiry: let’s expand speech acts to now contemplate the vast zoo of agencies able to project their voices into our mouths or their silences into our limbs. Austin had directed our attention downstream (to perlocution), Cooren wants us to look also upstream to what should be called “*pre-locutory*” acts.

The great originality of his attempt is that it is not a demolition (or a deconstruction) enterprise. The author remains firmly committed to the stock and trade of speech act theory and conversation analysis. The main empirical part of the book is the result of an extended field work and relies on the classical tools to carefully study micro interactions. In his view, to abandon the egocentric, anthropocentric, logocentric view of speech, is not to abandon any empirical *terra firma*. On the contrary, it is what allows to be much more realistic about what happens