ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Communication Theory at the Center: Ventriloquism and the Communicative Constitution of Reality

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In this article, I first propose to reinterpret R. T. Craig's (1999) call for a dialogue between communication perspectives as a formulation of design specs to which any constitutive model of communication should respond. I then propose to answer this call by metaphorically conceiving of communication as a form of ventriloquism, which translates our capacity to make other beings say or do things while we speak, write, or, more generally, conduct ourselves. Finally, I show to what extent this ventriloqual model of communication responds to the design specs of each of the 7 traditions Craig identified (rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, cybernetics, sociopsychology, sociocultural theory, and the critical approach), while maintaining a certain ontological and epistemological coherence.

For the 61st conference of the International Communication Association, Larry Gross (2011) encouraged us to put "communication at the center," an invitation that I found immediately appealing, as I could not think of a better title for an event that celebrates the dynamism of our field of studies. Nowadays, communication appears indeed central to an understanding of our "rapidly changing world" (p. 3), as mentioned in the Call for Papers. We live in a globalized world of new medias, social networks, emerging forms of journalism, and new designs of our information environment; a new world that the recent events in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and other countries contribute to defining and characterizing. But beyond this new sociotechnological reality, I could not help but think that putting communication at the center could also be interpreted as an invitation to think *communicatively* about the world, that is, to affirm the specificity and originality of our field vis-à-vis its sister disciplines, whether we think of anthropology, psychology, sociology, or even philosophy.

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In many respects, this call for originality and specificity has already been made, more than 10 years ago, by one of the past ICA presidents, Robert T. Craig, in his landmark article titled, ''Communication Theory as a Field,'' published in *Communication Theory* in 1999. We all know about this article, which could be understood as an invitation to initiate a dialogue between communication perspectives so that communication theory would become ''a coherent field of metadiscursive practice, a field of discourse about discourse with implications for the practice of communication'' (p. 120). We also know how Craig proposed to create the conditions of such a dialogue, conditions that, according to him, should be based on two principles.

The first principle, called *the constitutive model of communication as metamodel*, proposes that communication be more than an *explanandum*, that is, something that ought to be explained by our models or theories, but that it also be considered an *explanans*, that is, something that explains how our world *is what it is* and how it functions (Latour, 2002). In other words, it is not enough to notice that this world is shaped and transformed by communication technologies and new forms of communication habits and usages (sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, and anthropologists do that all the time); we also need to provide a communication model of this world, one which would mark the original contribution our field has to offer to the scientific community at large, to communication professionals or even to non-specialists. Here also, some key scholars like Carey (1989), Deetz (1994), Fairhurst (2007), Krippendorff (1994), Putnam (1983) and Taylor (1993) of our field have paved the way—three of them past ICA presidents and all of them ICA fellows—in that they have all called, directly or indirectly, for a constitutive view of communication. They have all worked, each in their own ways, on what it could mean to think about the world communicatively.

As for Craig's (1999) second principle, called *Communication Theory as Metadiscourse*, it implies that any theory of communication should be conceived as a way to communicate about communication. In this way it would make our field what he proposes to call a ''practical discipline,'' that is, a discipline that can ''provide conceptual resources for reflecting on communication problems'' (p. 130). Although this second principle might, at first sight, seem less appealing, I understand it as a plea to not only focus on the acts and activities of communication, that is, deal with embodied aspects of communication, but also to enter into a dialogue with commonsensical ways of conceiving of communication. One could even understand it as an invitation to beware of technical vocabularies that tend to restrict what we, scholars and researchers, tend to mean by communication and to embrace, on the contrary, the richness the word ''communication'' itself has to offer in terms of its numerous usages (technical and non technical).

Craig (1999) identifies what he considers to be *seven traditions* that are, for him, characteristic of our field: rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, cybernetics, sociopsychology, sociocultural theory, and the critical approach. According to him, these seven traditions, each in its respective way, do provide constitutive models of

communication (in connection with the first principle) by conceiving of communication from commonplace ways of thinking, or *topois*, that are specific to each (in connection with the second principle). Interestingly, each of these traditions potentially has something to say about the others, which triggers the conditions of a dialogical–dialectical field that Craig envisions for our discipline.

But where do we now stand 12 years after the publication of this article? As Craig (2007) himself has pointed out recently, this call for a dialogue between traditions was, unfortunately, not met with any real enthusiasm by the communication field. Despite an interesting debate around the pragmatic dimension of Craig's metamodel, by Chris Russill in particular (Craig, 2007; Russill, 2005, 2008), one cannot help but notice that no attempt has apparently been made to respond to his invitation, as if it was taken for granted that our field was forever condemned to fragmentation and incoherence.

So my question is, "Can we try to honor Craig's invitation?" and, if the response is yes, as I think it should be, what could be *one* possible response? Not THE response, of course—that would go against the conditions of an open dialogue, debate, or discussion—but at least *a* response that could certainly be then criticized, attacked, or even derided if this is what it takes to provoke a collective reflection. This is what I propose to do in this article.

Craig's design specs

First, and in connection with the practical and embodied dimension of our discipline (Craig, 1989), I propose to reinterpret Craig's (1999) call as a formulation of *design specs*, a *cahier des charges* as we would call it in French. I am using this notion, borrowed from engineering, precisely because it conveys the idea of interpreting or translating a set of specifications, or criteria, that a product or artifact should display for the latter to be considered acceptable by the person or organization that delegated its production. This formulation thus reminds us that any theoretical enterprise is also an activity of *construction*, a construction that ought to respect certain specifications that have been formulated by people and traditions and that could claim to faithfully represent key aspects of the reality that we, and they, are trying to theorize and to analyze.

Going back to Craig's (1999) metamodel, this means that each tradition can be considered as *having something to say* about what a constitutive model of communication should look like. That is to say that each tradition may be conceived as voicing specifications that tell us *what it takes* to design a communication model or theory, what criteria are relevant.

The advantage of using the notion of "design specs" is that many different models can claim to respond to these guidelines in their own specific ways. In other words, radically different (theoretical) "products" can emerge from the same set of design specifications, and this seems coherent with the sort of *constrained openness* advocated by Craig himself.

A response to Craig's call: Communication as ventriloquism

So what is my response to Craig's model? At this point, it is noteworthy that my answer should not be considered to be only mine, but will echo propositions made by several communication scholars who tend to identify themselves with what is today called the CCO movement, that is, a research movement that, from the end of the 1980s, proposed to conceive organization as being *communicatively constituted*; *hence the acronym, which stands for Communicative Constitution of Organization* (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011) Brummans, 2006; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011; Cooren & Matte, 2010; Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008; Kuhn, 2008; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Taylor, 1988; Taylor & Van Every, 1993, 2000, 2011; Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996). In order to present this movement, I could quote an excerpt from the preface of James R. Taylor's (1993) book:

> I have never been able to figure out how there could be an organization in the absence of communication, existing before communication, and on a material plane distinct from it. It seems self-evident to me that organization is a *product* of communication, and totally dependent on symbolic sense making through interaction for its mere existence. (p. ix)

What is at stake thus is a communicational ontology of organization, one which is an invitation to start *from* communication in order *to* explain organization and organizing and not the other way around (Brummans, Cooren, & Chaput, 2009; Katambwe & Taylor, 2006; Nicotera, in press).

So, how well does this constitutive approach actually respond to Craig's (1999) design specs? To what extent can we extend such an approach, more generally, to the idea of a *communicative constitution of reality*?

To respond to this question, I first need to present what I mean by communicative constitutiveness and then to show to what extent this constitutive model of communication does respond to each tradition's design specs.

So first, what do I mean by communicatively constitutive? If I had to summarize the idea in one sentence, I would say that it consists in noticing that a variety of forms of agency are always in play in *any* interaction, a phenomenon that I propose to call, metaphorically, *ventriloquism* (Cooren, 2008, 2010; Cooren & Bencherki, 2010). In American culture, ventriloquism was popularized through the dual performance of Edgar Bergen, the ventriloquist, and his dummy, Charlie McCarthy. Their celebrity was all the more surprising that they became famous through radio shows, which were aired from 1937 to 1955 (Goldblatt, 2006).

But what interests me in ventriloquism and why do I think it is an interesting metaphor to speak about communication in a constitutive way? Because this lower form of art or entertainment exploits what I consider to be one of the key elements of communication, that is, our capacity to make other beings *say or do things* while

we speak, write, or, more generally, conduct ourselves. Edgar Bergen's art indeed consists of making Charlie McCarthy say things, to which he, Edgar Bergen, reacts and responds. If Charlie McCarthy is animated by Edgar Bergen, it is therefore noteworthy that Edgar Bergen himself is also animated by the dummy he is supposed to manipulate (after all, he is responding to him).

It is precisely this oscillation or vacillation between the ventriloquist and the dummy that I find so fascinating, an oscillation/vacillation that makes us sometimes wonder who is the ventriloquist and who is the dummy (Goldblatt, 2006). While a classical study of interaction almost exclusively focuses on what human interactants do and how they do what they do (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997), a constitutive approach recognizes the effects by which people in interaction manage to act and speak *for* or *in the name* of specific beings to which they feel (consciously or unconsciously) attached, whether these beings be principles, values, beliefs, attitudes, ideas, ideologies, interests, organizations, etc. (Cooren et al., 2011; Taylor & Cooren, 1997). Positioning oneself or being positioned as speaking, for instance, in the name of say, an organization's interests, a specific idea or even a principle thus amounts to claiming that we are attached to them and that, ceteris paribus, it is also they that *animate* us and our position, that is, lead us to say or do something.

When an official (let's say, an ICA president, for instance) invokes the bylaws of his association to either justify a decision or decline a request that a member may have made, he/she is ventriloquizing these bylaws by indirectly making them say and do something, which creates an effect (always limited and limitable) of reproduction of institutional/organizational/social order. Ventriloquizing the policy also means that he/she is simultaneously ventriloquizing the association and its interests, a form of representation that, of course, can always be challenged and questioned. From a constitutive viewpoint, we see that there is not, on the one hand, communication taking place, and on the other hand, the organization called ICA. ICA is *made to speak* through a specific activity of communication, a specific activity that partly constitutes what ICA is and does.

The activity that consists of making someone or something say or do something—which is what I mean by ventriloquism—can thus be considered coextensive with any conversation, any discourse, whether we end up ventriloquizing not only policies and organizations, but also languages, accents, ideologies, speech communities, rules, norms, values, identities, statuses, etc.

Communicating thus *also always already* amounts to ventriloquizing all these beings that animate and express themselves through us, whether consciously or unconsciously (Derrida, 1986, 1988, 1992, 1994, 1995). They thus are enabled to convey an attachment, a passion, a constraint, that can be recognized as embodied in and through the way we write, talk, or otherwise conduct ourselves (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009). This allows us to expand our usual notion of agency by showing that we—the human beings—cultivate a lot of things in our conversations—things that could also be called *figures*, the name ventriloquists sometimes give to the dummies they manipulate (Goldblatt, 2006). It is these things that are *made to speak* and *act*

through what we say and do, not because they would frame or surround interactions from who knows where, but, on the contrary, *because they participate, as forms of agency, in these same interactions*, hence, the constitutive ontology.

If I ventriloquize a language or an accent, it is also this language or accent that ventriloquizes me. If I invoke a policy or a principle, it is also (my attachment to) this policy or principle that enjoins me to act in a specific way. If I ventriloquize an ideology, whether consciously or unconsciously, it is also this ideology that impels me to defend positions to which I feel attached. The effects of ventriloquism therefore are bidirectional and mark an oscillation/vacillation that I already pointed out. It implies that all the beings that we (re)produce in our conversations and discourses also participate in what defines or identifies us. For an accent or a language to live and exist, we have to make it live and exist in our interactions and discourse; for a policy or law to apply itself, it must be implicitly or explicitly invoked or ventriloquized in our discussion. And the same reasoning applies, of course, for *many things* (ideologies, cultures situations, realities, etc.)

As we see in these illustrations, the communicative constitution that I am defending here is what could therefore be called a *strong thesis* as it enjoins us to reconsider the mode of being or existence, that is, the very *constitution*, of these so called "abstract beings" that we call structures, ideologies, societies (Chaput, Brummans, & Cooren, 2011; Latour, 1993, 2005, 2011). They should rather be considered as agents or figures, which materialize themselves in and through our interaction. What we call a policy exists through all the effects of representation, incarnation, materialization that make it present in our actions, productions, and conducts, whether these incarnations take the form of the paper on which it is written or the voice of someone who would invoke it in a discussion. Similarly, languages—English or French, for instance—exist through all these effects of actualization by which they embody themselves in a given text, speech, or conversation (where else could they exist?).

The communicational ontology I am proposing does not lapse into some form of Platonism. None of these beings that we call, for instance, a language, a policy, a nation, an attitude, a passion, an ideology, exist outside their communicational incarnations, which should not mean that they do not have their part of immateriality. It is therefore a logic of in/materiality where beings navigate between concreteness and abstractness. What we therefore call an organization—ICA for instance—materializes, actualizes, presents, embodies itself through all the beings who—or that—claim to, or are deemed to, act or speak in its name, whether these beings be spokespersons, policies, operations, employees, by laws, journals, the Web site, etc. (Cooren, 2006; Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008). If there is anything that we call an organization, a society, or even a country, it must exist through all these ventriloqual effects of representation/incarnation/materialization/reification.

So now, to what extent does this constitutive model of communication respond to the design specs specified by each or our traditions?

Ventriloquism and the seven traditions

First, let us look at what the mother discipline of our field, **rhetoric**, has to tell us in terms of communicative constitutiveness? What are its design specs? Certainly what Maurice Charland (1987) proposes to call ''constitutive rhetoric'' when he notes that the subjects of any discourse or speech should be considered as also always already *constituted* by this very discourse (Althusser, 1971; Burke, 1945; McGee, 1975). This rhetoric of interpellation, as Charland also calls it, can, for instance, be found in narratives that identify collective and individual subjects, portrayed as animated by specific desires and objectives. Any discourse or speech thus functions as a form of *staging* that projects specific protagonists, constraints, and desires, a staging of figures in which the audience itself also is a priori inscribed and defined.

Even if we do not necessarily have to follow the critical logic of Charland's (1987) perspective, we can acknowledge his constitutive position while also proposing a more interactional version of his analysis. While constitutive rhetoric seems exclusively interested in *big D* Discourse, as Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) call it, that is, a sort of Foucaldian type of discourse (Foucault, 1977), such constitutive properties can also be identified in discourse in interaction (*small d* discourse), as suggested, for instance, by the phenomenological tradition, especially in its ethnomethodological extension (Garfinkel, 1967, 2002; Heritage, 1984). The CCO approach thus responds to the rhetorical tradition by conceiving of discourse (big D or small d) as *participating* in the mode of being and doing of organizations and, by extension, social forms. But is it enough?

Of course not, as **semiotics** reminds us of the key role that signs play in any interaction (either between interlocutors or between human beings and artifacts). While rhetoric essentially focuses on the *addressed* dimension of discourse, semiotics claims that we ought to pay attention not only to the structure of texts, and more generally, signs (Saussure, 1959), but also to their *agency* and effectiveness (Greimas, 1983, 1987; Peirce, 1955). Whether they take the form of procedures, mission statements, annual reports, logos, or organizational charts, these textual agents (Brummans, 2007; Cooren, 2004, 2008b, 2009a), through the way we make them talk, tend to subject or submit human actors to specific situations, identities and programs, which illustrates the hybrid nature of any organizational form and, by extension, any social form (Meunier & Vasquez, 2008). If semiotics and rhetoric thus seem to agree on the constitutive nature of texts, semioticians insist on the relative autonomy of the iconic, indexical, and symbolic artifacts that are produced in action and/or interaction (Cooren, 2009b).

For the CCO approach, responding to the design specs of semiotics can thus consist of recognizing the agency of architectural elements, (oral and written) texts, machines, and artifacts in general (Latour, 1996, 1999) while paying, of course, attention to the way they are interpreted and translated in interaction, i.e., to how we make them say or do something, how we ventriloquize them (Latour, 2010). According to these specifications, organizational forms, and more

generally, *social forms*, can thus be conceived as *actualizing* themselves in a plenum of agencies, whether these agents are architectural, textual, technological, or human (Cooren, 2006; Putnam & Cooren, 2004). While semiotics has historically been relatively uninterested in conversation and interaction in general, the challenge thus consists here in acknowledging these forms of agency as they express themselves in conversation and, more generally, in co-construction (Robichaud, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2006; Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004).

Interestingly, it is this idea of co-construction that, in many respects, defines the design specs of the **phenomenological** tradition, especially through its representatives in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967, 2002) and conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1992, 1997). What is this tradition asking us to pay attention to in terms of communicative constitution? To recognize, at least, that our world should be conceived as not only *co-constructed* in interaction, but also as the object of a perpetual *negotiation* and *redefinition* (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997). While rhetoric and semiotics tend, for different reasons, to neglect the eventful character of interaction, this tradition insists on the many different ways and methods by which human interactants participate in the cogeneration of the world in which they evolve, invoking the aspects of the context that they find relevant or defining each other in terms of identities, roles, and interests (Heritage, 1984; Lynch, 1993).

In this interactional world, invoking a rule, status or procedure has to be performed ''for another next first time'' (p. 186), as Harold Garfinkel (1992) nicely puts it. It is therefore not enough to recognize the addressed or attributive nature of discourse, as specified by constitutive rhetoric, or the agency of texts, images, or turns of talk, as advocated by semiotics; we also need to develop this communicative constitution in an interactional and even *transactional* register (Taylor & Van Every, 2011). According to the design specs of the phenomenological tradition, we therefore have to insist on the embodied, situated, eventful character of communication by centering our analyses not only on what interactants do in interaction, but also on *how* they do what they do, thus paving the way to an analysis of conversational strategies and competences (Sanders, 1987, 2007).

According to the phenomenological tradition, it is not enough to recognize that things like principles, collectives, cultures, or policies can be evoked in a conversation, we also have to pay attention to how people disagree or diverge about what these principles, collectives, cultures, or policies are saying or telling them to do. In keeping with rhetoric and semiotics, the addressed nature of such texts can be recognized, but it is always a form of addressing or attributing that can be discussed, questioned, and negotiated in the interaction. The agency of the figures we mobilize in our talk and writing is always therefore an open question (Cooren, 2008a).

But in responding to the phenomenological design specs, which advocate a sort of bottom-up approach to social reality, we then seem to find ourselves in contradiction with the fourth tradition identified by Craig (1999), that is, **cybernetics**. If there is, indeed, a top-down approach that, at first sight, seems to privilege the whole to the detriment of the part, it is this tradition, which generally insists on the systemic

and holistic effects of communication (Bateson, 1972, 1979; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). But this would be failing to take into account the contribution of the *second* cybernetics, that is, the bottom-up cybernetics of autopoiesis and self-organization, as advocated, among others, by Klaus Krippendorff (1994), Niklas Luhmann (1992), Seidl and Becker (2006), as well as Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987). If we need indeed to recognize systemic effects, that is, patterns and repetitions, and how they contribute to the ordering of actions and activities, we also need to show where this systematicity is coming from without ever leaving ground level, the *terra firma* of interaction, as advocated by social phenomenology.

So who or what are these forms of agency that participate in these ordering effects? Precisely the various forms of agency that semiotics helped us identify, whether they are textual, technological, or even architectural. It is their existence that triggers these effects of repetition and iteration without having to resort to an ethereal and disembodied whole that would dictate (from out of nowhere) the conduct of its parts. If there are indeed *systems*, as advocated by the cybernetic tradition, it is because these systems, these patterns are the product of hybrid interactions (Schoeneborn, 2011). Klaus Krippendorff (1994), who was Ross Ashby's (1956) student and James R. Taylor's advisor, reminds us of this communicative constitution through his *Recursive Communication Theory*, which asserts that "any aspect of communication can be understood only in terms of other aspects of communication," and which thus means that "communication needs to be studied from within itself" (Campos, 2009, p. 183) and not from an overarching structure that would hypothetically frame the interactions.

But let's tackle now the fifth tradition, that is, **sociopsychology**, as it has been developed in our field for the past 50 years. Its design specs also appear, at first sight, quite problematical to the constitutive approach I have been advocating so far. As Craig (1999) points out, this tradition:

> theorizes communication as a process of expression, interaction, and influence, a process in which the behavior of humans or other complex organisms expresses psychological mechanisms, states, and traits and, through interaction with the similar expressions of other individuals, produces a range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects. (p. 143)

At this stage, we could wonder whether we should not simply give up the whole enterprise, the designs specs becoming suddenly too difficult to adhere to. How can we indeed expect to reconcile the CCO perspective I advocate with this tradition, which seems in direct contradiction with the first four (especially the first three I have been discussing) in terms of ontology, epistemology, and methodology?

But let's remember that the basic idea of our exercise is not to respect a whole tradition, but to respond to what seems to *matter* to its representatives in terms of communicative constitutiveness. In other words, is it possible to answer to the social

psychologists of our field while maintaining a certain epistemological coherence in the constitutive model I am promoting? I think that the response is "yes" if we accept to speak not only in terms of causes and effects, but *also* in terms of *animation* and *agency* (McGlone & Giles, in press; McGlone & Pfiester, 2009) when we study things like attitudes, traits, beliefs, feelings, and emotions (just to mention a few).

Defending the idea of a *communicative constitution of reality* thus also consists of showing that things like attitudes, beliefs, traits, feelings, and emotions constantly invite themselves in our discussions through the way they animate us (in which case they are the ventriloquist and we are the dummies) and, reversely, through the way we (willingly or not) ventriloquize them through our conduct and talk (in which case we are the ventriloquists and they are the dummies) (Fitch, 2003; Van Vuuren & Cooren, 2010). According to the constitutive approach I am advocating, interactions should be considered decentered, excentered, a-centered to the extent 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 and can thus be felt or experienced (Fitch & Foley, 2007; Putnam, 2007; Tracy, 2007).

Interestingly, such a decentering allows us to tackle the sixth tradition, the one Craig (1999) calls **sociocultural theory**, which insists, in its design specs, on the need to account for the effects of production and reproduction of social order. As we know, one of the main challenges facing this tradition consists of finding a balance between the agency of social actors and the so-called structures that appear to dictate their conduct (Giddens, 1984; McPhee, 1985, 1989, 2004, McPhee, Corman, & Iverson, 2007; McPhee & Iverson, 2009; McPhee & Poole, 2001). So how can a constitutive view of communication respond to this challenge, which can arguably be considered the main tenets of this tradition's design specs? Precisely by recognizing that what sociocultural theories tend to call "structures" can always be precisely reinterpreted as other forms of agency that participate in and contribute to the performance of what is happening in any situation (Castor & Cooren, 2006; Cooren, Fox, Robichaud, & Talih, 2005; Cooren, Matte, Vasquez, & Taylor, 2007; Cooren, Thompson, Canestraro, & Bodor 2006; Latour & Lepinay, 2010; Tarde, 2009, 2010).

We can thus remain on the *ground* of communication, but we then need to acknowledge the effects of iteration and reproduction that result from activities of ventriloquism. For instance, invoking or following a given culture in specific circumstances will produce effects of iteration and reproduction, not because of an overarching structure that determines our behavior, but because of a specific figure—the culture in this case—to which we feel attached and that thus dictates our conduct. We can thus be attentive to the productive aspect of an interaction (its eventfulness) while at the same time recognizing the role of reproduction, through the various figures (ideologies, principles, policies, etc.) we keep ventriloquizing, because they animate us (Vasquez, in press).

So let's conclude with the seventh tradition, the one that Craig identifies as **critical theory**, which conceives of communication as what he calls a discursive reflection in a project of emancipation. As Craig (1999) notices, this tradition

> challenges the naturalness of the social order and questions the rational validity of all authority, tradition, and conventional belief, including traditional beliefs about the nature of reason itself, which, it claims, have distorted reason in the service of capitalism, racism and patriarchy. (p. 147)

Echoing the critical version of rhetoric, this tradition thus consists of denouncing, from a given normative horizon, the effects of power and domination that are deemed to pervade our discourses and conversations (Deetz, 1992; Deetz, Heath, & MacDonald, 2007; Mumby, 1987, 1993, 1997, 2001).

According to the design specs of this tradition, any communication theory that does not take into account these effects of power, ideology, or domination would err through ignorance by wrongly implying the equality of the forces in presence when communication takes place. How can we thus respond to these specifications according to our constitutive approach? By showing that the effects of ventriloquism I mentioned earlier precisely are as many means by which interlocutors can mobilize various forms of agency and build some legitimate forms of power, that is, forms or figures of authority (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009).

Taylor already noted it in his 1993 book, authority and author have the same Latin root (*auctor*), which means that building our authority or having or being attributed authority, consists of precisely acting or speaking (or being perceived as acting and speaking) in the name of other authors who would be speaking or acting through us (see also Taylor & Van Every, 2011), whether these authors be, for instance, statuses, collectives, or ideologies. While I was speaking in specific circumstances (in my presidential column, for instance) from June 2010 to May 2011, it was also the figure of the president of ICA who was speaking. Being one of the main voices for ICA also means that it was also ICA that was literally and figuratively speaking through my contributions in specific circumstances (in a meeting with other communication associations, for instance).

Without necessarily accepting the systematic character of critical tradition's denunciative project (to the extent that, in my opinion, all effects of power and authority should not be necessarily denounced, and that it is anyway not necessarily our job, as scholars or researchers, to do it), we see that the communicational ontology I am proposing responds to the criteria of this tradition by making the phenomena of power and authority the very condition, indeed, of *any* interaction and discourse.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from this exercise I have been proposing? Certainly that it seems possible to take seriously what each of Craig's (1999) traditions has to say

about communicational phenomena while maintaining, it is at least my conviction, a certain ontological and epistemological *coherence* (Anderson, 1996; Berger, 1991; Burleson, 1992). The challenge indeed is not only to respond to the design specs adequately, but also to conceive and especially build something that could *cohere* and *work*. The last thing we need is a patchwork theory.

What is key, as we saw, is to translate, without too much betrayal, the exigencies of each tradition while maintaining the perspective or ontology we want to promote. This ontology led us—according to our own design specs, so to speak (but it is also the one, I could contend, of *any* constitutive model of communication, included Craig's 1999 metamodel)—to analytically start from communicational phenomena in order to understand not only their mode of being and functioning (echoing Krippendorff's 1994 project), but also the mode of being and functioning of individuals, groups, organizations, societies, and collectives in general. We saw that our design specs prevent us, for instance, from falling back on the *Deus Ex Machina* that the notion of structure evokes, by showing how it seems much more coherent and productive, analytically speaking, to replace this hodgepodge notion by all the forms of agency that seem to *animate* our conducts (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009).

But our design specs also prevent us from maintaining the absolute integrity of the human agents by showing that they can be themselves considered as constituted, inhabited, animated, or even sometimes haunted or possessed by desires, passions, interests, attitudes, values, habits, identities, etc., what I propose to call a plenum of figures or agencies (Cooren, 2006, 2010). Advocating a constitutive approach thus amounts to showing that the interactional scene should open itself up to the agency of other figures that *speak through us*—the human beings. It is therefore a way to recognize the part of ventriloquism that constitutes any act of communication. Without such openness, we are condemned, I think, to merely doing bad sociology.

In general, one way to summarize my constitutive position would consist of acknowledging that "*Ça communique*" when we communicate, as we would say in French. This expression, which is almost impossible to translate, conveys the idea that many different things (which are referred to by the deictic "Ça," the equivalent of "this" or "that") get communicated when people communicate with each other: ideas, emotions, reflections, knowledge, experiences, cultures, expertise, concerns, preoccupations, but also, and *through them*, realities and situations. Advocating a communicative constitution of reality does not amount to falling into some degenerate form of constructivism (or even solipsism). It means, on the contrary, that, for instance, preoccupations, realities, and situations get expressed and translated in what we say or write. And these expressions, animations or translations can, of course, always be questioned and negotiated on the *terra firma* of interaction.

Advocating *my version* of a constitutive view of communication thus implies that we open the communicational scene up as broadly as possible so that we include everything that gets translated into what is said, written or, more generally, done. If human interactants ventriloquize these things, that is, make them speak, it is also

because these very things are supposed to ventriloquize or animate them, making of human interactants both actors *and* passers. Although this position is often mistaken for an attack, on my part, on human agency, it is, I would claim, *the complete opposite*. Some human beings can precisely be considered more authoritative, more powerful, more trustworthy precisely because what they say or do is not *only* perceived as what they say or do.

When an expert speaks, it is not only he/she who is supposed to be expressing himself or herself, but also, and this is the very condition of his/her authority, his/her expertise, and through this expertise, aspects of realities that he/she is supposed to represent or translate because they animate him or her. This does not mean of course, that this expertise and the reality that it is supposed to translate should be considered given. They have, on the contrary, to be *worked out* and possibly *negotiated* in interaction, leading way to its establishment or questioning.

As we see in this single example, the recognition of other forms of agency in interaction does not mean that the human beings suddenly appear powerless or voiceless. In contrast, it is because a person can be perceived as voicing other forms of agency that he/she can be considered more powerful, authoritative, and influential. The same reasoning, incidentally, can be followed for the question of responsibility. Recognizing other forms of agency does not mean that the human beings suddenly become irresponsible. In contrast, it is because agency is shared between various forms of agency that responsibility is something that ought to be attributed, taken or claimed in the *eventfulness* that this kind of action implies (Cooren, 2010a).

Far from being a mere intellectual enterprise, and in keeping with Robert Craig's (1999) second principle (*Communication Theory as Metadiscourse*), the CCO approach, as I conceive it, should also be understood as a *practical endeavor*, capable of providing conceptual resources for reflecting on real, everyday social, political, and ethical problems. In the midst of the turmoil that this planet and its population (human and non human) are currently experiencing, whether in Russia, Syria, Egypt, or elsewhere, we, as communication scholars, should show that our traditions have something to say about what is happening in the world.

But having something to say means that we have to have a *communicational* way of approaching the world, like when we speak of a psychological, sociological, anthropological, economical, or political way of conceiving of the world. This is why the constitutive question is so important and this is why I hope Craig's call will be answered.

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