# Speaking

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While speaking is often contrasted with writing, this chapter considers that ambiguity between the two modalities confers to speaking its ability to affect organizing. The chapter conceptually discusses how these modalities have been distinguished, including by considering speaking as a human prerogative and writing as a derivative, and suggests that such distinctions are hard to justify. The chapter calls for greater attention to the performative power of speaking and to the emancipatory facet of talk, and suggests that closer attention to how people speak would reveal how they constitute a shared world. After questioning whether distinguishing talk and text is useful, the chapter shows that the two are in fact blended, especially when viewing speaking as situated action, when paying attention to conversational dynamics or when exploring its performative dimension, which leads to recognizing its critical implications in terms of giving a voice to all in constituting a collectivity.

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Text and writing are often celebrated or decried as the *sine qua non* condition of bureaucracy and rational organizing (Derrida 1996; Hull 2003; Vismann 2008) and as tools to manage complexity and stabilize change (Anderson 2004; Callon 2002; Fayard and Metiu 2013). While it is an important topic of study in literature and linguistics, orality seems to be left out on the curbside of organization and management theory, including within organizational and management communication studies. This is all

the more surprising given that the opposition between talk and text, or orality and literacy, is at the core of philosophical debates surrounding communication (Ong 2012).

Communication has not always defaulted, as it seems to do now, to writing (Peters 1999). In Plato's *Phaedrus* (2002: 69), writing is described as "the appearance of intelligence, not real intelligence," whereas good rhetors would learn to deliver their speech orally, a tradition that continues today in the US with public speaking curricula (Boromisza-Habashi, Hughes, and Malkowski 2016). More recently, Walter J. Ong (2012: 73) similarly advocated for the priority of orality over writing:

> Because in its physical constitution as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups. [… When] each reader enters into his or her own private reading world, the unity of the audience is shattered, to be re-established only when oral speech begins again. Writing and print isolate.

Ong, thus, intimately associates talking with humanity, and in particular with belonging to a community. He considers writing to be at once less connected with one's "interior," and as a solitary activity. While talking would engage with the body, writing, for its part, would reduce all sensations to visual analogues, thus impoverishing the communication experience.

In the study of organizational and management communication, literature on talk as such remains scarce. Most of it uses the notions of "talking" or "speaking" in a metaphorical sense, in particular to describe how people engage with a topic (for instance, "talking about diversity" in Auger-Dominguez 2019). Over the next few pages, we will see that this scarcity may not simply be an oversight. In fact, a clear distinction between talking and writing, or between orality and literacy, is difficult to draw. We will see that it is precisely the inability to untangle the two that makes communication so relevant to the study of organizations and management practices.

That being said, we will also propose a few avenues for a better study of talk in organizational settings. A well-established tradition in this sense is conversation analysis (Goodwin and Heritage 1990; Sacks 1992), although researchers are also pointing out that studying *just* talk is insufficient to fully

account for interactional situations, which are inherently multimodal (Mondada 2007). We will also suggest shedding a new light on Austin's (1962) notion of "locution" as part of his speech act theory, and explore ideas of speaking up and voicing. Through a review of these research avenues, we will see that much of what goes on in organizations is done through talk, an insight that Mintzberg (1973) already suggested decades ago. More precisely, we will suggest that organizations are constituted as voices are distributed among beings (Cooren 2010). We will conclude by inviting researchers to be more precise regarding the concrete practices that underlie communication, in order to discover the richness of what happens when people speak.

## 1. Blending talk and text

Jean-Dominique Bauby (1997) was a successful journalist until he suffered a massive stroke that left him entirely paralyzed except for his left eyelid. As he could not speak, he dictated his memoir, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* by blinking his eyelid to select one letter at a time on a board that his speech therapist would show him, until he composed the book's 139 pages.

In Jordan, Doctors Without Borders renovated a hospital where a French nurse oversaw the construction of an operating theatre by local workers who only spoke Arabic. She relied on informal translation by other colleagues. Over time, though, the workers and she developed a repertoire of gestures that allowed them to relay simple ideas even though they did not share a common tongue (Bencherki, Matte and Pelletier 2016).

The two cases above crack open the seemingly airtight distinction between orality and writing. Bauby (1997) did not utter a word nor scribble a letter, and yet he wrote a book. As for the nurse, she did not technically "speak" with the construction workers, and yet she didn't write either. Communication is richer than implied by the either/or alternative often established between talking and writing. In both cases, Ong would surely consider that Bauby and the nurse resorted to visual analogues, and yet it would seem unfair to think of them as less in touch with their interiority or humanity than if they had actually

spoken. Similar questions on what counts as talk or text could be raised with signed languages (e.g., Hodge, Ferrara and Anible 2019) and non-verbal features of communication (e.g., Acheson 2008).

It is also not quite correct to assume that writing (in the broadest sense) requires a "medium," be it a sheet of paper or a computer, whereas oral communication is, literally, immediate and not needing the intercession of a medium (as suggests Ong 2012: 172). The fact is that any communication situation, even when it is oral, involves some form of mediation, at the very least because the speaker must express herself using a language that may more or less faithfully convey her intention (Derrida 1998). Her words may even betray her: she may say things she didn't mean or that could be used against her. These breakdowns are evidence of the mediated nature of oral communication (Cooren 2018a).

Furthermore, actual studies of the way people speak tend to suggest that people rarely do so in isolation. People are not just talking heads; when they talk, they do so in an embodied way (Goodwin and LeBaron 2011). For example, they gesture to get their argument across (Brassac et al. 2008), they refer to documents and look at blackboards together (Cooren and Bencherki 2010; Vásquez et al. 2018). Research methods now attempt to account for the "multimodal" character of interaction, for instance by developing new transcription strategies, recognizing that talk is but a portion of what occurs (Mondada 2018).

Even Ong, in what may seem a self-contradiction, acknowledged that orality and literacy are not entirely separate domains. For instance, he recognized that "Writing serve[s] largely to recycle knowledge back into the oral world" (Ong 2012: 117), which does give primacy to orality, but also stresses the interplay between the two. Similarly, while Ong initially appeared to argue that orality better expresses interiority and humanity, he also conceded that writing produces characters with introspection and "elaborately worked out analyses of inner states of soul and their inwardly structured sequential relationships" (Ong 2012: 149). It thus appears that the prerogatives of orality and those of literacy are not as opposed as one might think. This is made all the more true in the context of secondary and digital oralities, when people write for others to recite on television or radio, and when young people use oral-like language when chatting online and texting on their phones (Soffer 2016).

This intermingling of talk and text is crucial in communication's ability to contribute to sociality and to the constitution of collectives of all kinds, including organizations. Indeed, it has been proposed that organizations are constituted through the interplay of talk and text, the former allowing the formulation and negotiation of ways of doing, decisions and rules, and the latter allowing them to endure beyond the context of a single conversation, only to be interpreted again in talk (Taylor et al. 1996; Taylor and Van Every 2000). It is precisely the ability of language to escape the control of its author and to venture beyond her intention that offers it organizing properties (Cooren 2000). It is when language does not merely convey each individual "interior," but gains autonomy, that it may move past its expressive function and become an object of collective inquiry and possibly guide and constrain human action (Bencherki et al. 2019).

Despite the fundamental difficulty in untangling talk and text, and if we caricature the opposition between the two, we must acknowledge that the "conversation" pole has been mostly ignored in organization and management scholarship. Only a few studies take the time to consider what takes place when people speak as part of their work life, for instance during strategic conversations (Samra-Fredericks 2003) and in board meetings (Cooren 2004b), in exercising leadership (Fairhurst 2007), or when people orient to a common object of work (Luff and Heath 2019). These studies have in common that they adopt one version or another of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. In the following section, I will present how these analytical traditions may help to value speaking in organization and management communication studies.

## 2. Speaking as situated action: Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis

While they remain rare overall, especially in organizational and management studies, there is an increasing number of studies looking at the detail of how people accomplish their work. Typically, these studies adopt, as a theoretical and methodological attitude, ethnomethodology or conversation analysis, which are jointly known as EM/CA (see Llewellyn and Hindmarsh 2010). These studies reveal how apparently complex and broad organizational phenomena are in fact substantiated by seemingly "minor"

conduct (Clark and Pinch 2010). One of these conducts consists of the way we talk, from everyday conversations to executive decisions (Boden 1994).

Attention to the detail of talk is justified on the premise that social order must be reconstructed "for a next time" in interaction (Garfinkel 2002: 98). Authority, for instance, is not a stable asset; rather, it must be performed by bringing into each situation absent people, principles and things that lend their authority to the speaker (Bencherki, Matte, and Cooren 2019; Benoit-Barné and Cooren 2009; Bourgoin, Bencherki, and Faraj 2019). The same goes for other seemingly abstract organizational notions, such as property, which is accomplished in a diversity of practical ways; resorting to an ownership deed is a rare exception and is itself a communicative action as people must negotiate its meaning (Bencherki and Bourgoin 2019). As another example, it is also through situated interaction that workers address the ethical concerns that confront them by discursively confronting the demands of various standards and imperatives (Cooren 2016; Matte and Bencherki 2019). Looking at the way people talk, in each case, allows a discovery of how they, together, concretely handle issues of consequence to them, in an empirical and inductive manner, rather than deducting what their behavior should be from abstract definitions.

Talk, then, is not only a means to convey a message. Thinking in terms of message exchange would be reductive of all that takes place when people interact. Instead, better analytical insight is gained when conceiving talk as social action (Pomerantz and Fehr 1997). More precisely, this means that in speaking together in a certain way, people are jointly accomplishing actions and constructing situations where some expectations are imposed and accountability is demanded for violations. The building blocks for these constructions are the same ones that people use to manage their talk. For instance, the way turn-taking is accomplished can demonstrate outrage at the previous speaker's utterance, by interrupting them, or hesitation, by delaying one's turn. On the other hand, the inability to take a turn may indicate a lower social status (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). In this sense, the sequence of talk, the expectation of

adjacency pairs and the (dis)preference for some responses – as when a "how are you?" calls for a "good and you?" – form the basic infrastructure of social order (Schegloff and Sacks 1973).

The term "adjacency pairs" is somewhat of a misnomer given that they may be nested. For instance, "how are you?" could be followed by a second question, "are you talking to me?" and its response, "yes, you!" before resuming the main activity, "oh, I'm good, thanks!" (Heritage 1984). Furthermore, it may be more useful to think in terms of a triad than a pair, given that the confirmation that the interaction met expectations will be witnessable in the third turn of talk (Weick 1979 refers to this as a "double-interact"). For instance, if someone asks, "Can you hand me this file?" and another person responds, "Here it is!" we must wait until the first speaker answers either, "Thank you!" or, "Oh, no, I meant the other file!" to know whether the interaction succeeded and feel a sense of closure. It is only because this third turn may often be omitted (we do not always thank each other) that triads can be mistaken for pairs (Cooren and Fairhurst 2004).

Attention to the detail of interaction teaches us that collectives and organizations are built from the ground up using such triadic blocks, rather than being transcendent structures looming over our interactions. The only context of an utterance is the utterances that came before and it forms, itself, the context for the ones that come after (Pomerantz, Sanders, and Bencherki 2018). The meaning of what someone says, then, is pragmatic and comes from the saying's contribution to an ongoing flow of action (Sanders 1999). It is at least in part dependent on "its location within a sequence" (Philipsen 1990: 228). Or, to say it otherwise, hearers and speakers coordinate their actions while they infer "emerging meaning by analyzing the unfolding structure of the talk in progress" (Goodwin and Heritage 1990: 290). For instance, determining what is strategic or not to organizational members is achieved through the way matters of concern are presented and taken up in conversation (Bencherki et al. 2019). Even telling who's a member or not depends on how others perceive their contribution as participating to the ongoing activity (Bencherki and Snack 2016).

Considering speaking as a situated action, which takes place in specific interactions, thus highlights that it is an orderly, sequenced process that serves as an infrastructure for the accomplishment of seemingly "broader" activities. It also puts the emphasis on the pragmatic nature of talk, whose meaning is worked out as people participate in their joint conversational action. Talking, then, is doing.

3. Conversational lamination and text/conversation dynamics

Paying such close attention to how people talk and interact may give the impression that we are missing the bigger picture of organizational reality. However, as Boden (1994) suggests, organizational actors themselves weave together individual communicative events – conversations, decisions, declarations, etc. – into more or less coherent organizational wholes, a process she described as "conversational lamination." For instance, people may remind each other, during their current interaction, of agreements they made earlier and somewhere else, thus binding the space-time of their organization (Cooren 2004b; Vásquez and Cooren 2013). As such references take place iteratively, conversations are layered on top of each other, forming the so-called organizational structure. In this sense, there is no need for the analyst to supplement the analysis of interactions with "context" since actors themselves make connections to relevant contextual features within their interactions, which in turn will make up the context for further interactions.

Context, however, may at times appear to be external and "objective." This is because it is often available to us in the form of texts that inscribe and provide longevity to prior decisions and agreements. These may be texts in the conventional sense, for instance in the form of an organization's rules and regulations, or its strategic plan, which are the result of prior conversations and may again constrain future conversations. In this sense, speaking and writing flow into one another, as writing has been shown to allow elements from each conversation to be mobilized again in another context, thus allowing agreements and decisions to last beyond the situation where they were formulated in the first place (Taylor and Van Every 2000). This is the case, for instance, when people refer to notes and documents produced at previous meetings to remember what work they have already accomplished and what they

still need to discuss (Cooren et al. 2015). However, writing must be made to matter in each conversation in order to make a difference in the ongoing activity, where documents, notes and other elements are being used. Sometimes, we fail to bring up the right sheet of paper, or to recognize its meaning, or to attribute the same importance to it as we used to (Vásquez et al. 2018). While texts may participate in different ways into interactions, their mobilization in talk remains the most prominent (Brummans 2007; Cooren 2004a).

Texts can take a multiplicity of forms aside from simply written words on a sheet of paper. For instance, a piece of software is the result of numerous conversations over interests and collective action during its development and implementation phase. However, once it is deployed, it also appears as a "material" and immutable text that reminds its users, including those who were absent at the time it was put in place, of those previous conversations, with the inherent risk of them not being recognized if the software doesn't get the organizational text right, making it seem not to "work" (Taylor and Virgili 2008). Among management consultants, texts often take the form of Microsoft PowerPoint slide decks that encapsulate models and methods, are the result of negotiations with clients, and that consultants share with each other, thus reproducing ways of doing things (Bourgoin and Muniesa 2016; Schoeneborn 2013). The same text may be distributed among several materializations (a rule may be written in a bylaw, coded into a piece of software, and revisited during new employee training) and may become "authoritative," in the sense that it guides and, so to speak, co-authors further organizational conversations and texts (Kuhn 2008).

Through the notion of text, we are therefore able to capture the endurance of speech between conversations and its circulation from one interaction to another. We do not continuously start over and renegotiate hierarchies, roles, task distribution and other facets of organizing because we inscribe what we say and do face-to-face (or through technological mediation) into texts of all sorts, including mnemonic traces, i.e., what we remember from one conversation to the next. We can then mobilize these texts again in the future, thus ensuring the continuity of our collectives through time and space.

## 4. The performativity of speaking: Speech act theory and the locution

Considering talk as social action – as something that people do and through which they do things – can be captured in the notion that talk is *performative*. This term has taken a variety of meanings in organization and management studies (see Gond et al. 2016), but its origin can be traced back to John L. Austin's (1962) speech act theory. The idea of performativity was further developed by John Searle (1969) as well as Judith Butler (1990; Butler 1993). For Austin and his followers, language does not only describe a pre-existing reality: it also actively *does* things and transforms reality, i.e., performs it. Arguably, speech act theory is not restricted to speech *per se* and it has been convincingly used to analyze the ability of texts to act on reality (e.g., Derrida 1988). However, as its name indicates, it is rooted in the way we speak.

Austin's (1962) starting point was that, while language had mostly been understood in terms of reference (i.e., the meaning of a word corresponds to the thing that it describes or expresses), reducing language to reference fails to account for many ways in which it is actually used (a view shared by Wittgenstein 1953). When considering what people tangibly do with words, we can see that many utterances cannot be explained in terms of reference, for example when someone gives an order, asks a question, commits herself, expresses condolences, and so forth. Even instances where words describe reality are, in fact, performative, to the extent that describing or informing someone of something is also an action (Searle 1979, calls these "assertives"). Other instances include when someone promises to do something ("commissives"), when they give instructions ("directives"), express what they feel about a situation ("expressives"), or change the state of relations between people and things ("declarations") (Searle 1979).

One of Austin's most famous examples of this last case is when a priest says, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." In doing so, he not only describes the couple's pre-existing relationship – as if the priest was merely noticing that the couple had somehow gotten married – but produces it. Had the ceremony failed to proceed to the moment the priest said those words, depending on the country's laws,

the couple may very well not be married. In organizational settings, a manager who says, “You’re fired!” effectively fires you, and the one who says, “Nice work!” describes the quality of your work but also compliments you and recognizes you as a valuable member of the organization.

In addition to classifying speech acts according to the type of action they perform, Austin also offers a threefold division of the levels on which analysis can be conducted: the locutionary level looks at the fact that people speak at all (for instance, a junior employee may build up the courage to speak up during a meeting); the illocutionary looks at what they do in speaking (she may ask a question, provide information, give instructions on how to do something, commit herself to doing something, etc.); and the perlocutionary looks at the consequences of speaking (she impresses her manager, she contributes to the project, she prompts others to react to her suggestion, etc.).

The fact that talk is not only descriptive but also brings about new reality has been used to understand, for example, how conversations enable organizational change (Ford and Ford 1995). The relationship between talk and action is also at the heart of corporate social responsibility communication as it allows an understanding of how promises, as illocutionary acts (namely, commissives), turn into tangible action through their perlocutionary consequences (Christensen, Morsing, and Thyssen 2019). What people do with words, therefore, is not reducible to the semantic content of their utterances. Understanding the actions that take place when speaking must therefore take into account the entire situation in which speaking occurs. Such an analysis is exemplified in Judith Butler’s study of hate speech, where she shows that the meaning of a speech act cannot be dissociated from “the act that the body performs in the speaking [of] the act” (Butler 1997: 11). For instance, silence can also be hurtful and complicit of hate speech when it is used to refrain from denouncing abuse (Covarrubias 2008).

Speech, then, is always said by someone, somewhere, in a specific manner and using a corporeal body. It is not abstract meaning. Public speaking research emphasizes the bodily dimension of speech delivery, looking at how facial expressiveness, gestures and height, but also anxiety, play a part in talk’s ability to affect audience members (Baker and Redding 1962; Beatty and Behnke 1991; Burgoon, Birk,

and Pfau 1990). Consider how being a young-looking consultant struggling to be taken seriously, or a fair-skinned woman with a British accent running a hospital ward in Kenya, would influence how one speaks and interacts with others (Bourgoin and Harvey 2018; Matte and Bencherki 2019). Discounting this embodied character is a "naturalization" of the (power) relations that speech engenders (Deetz 1992).

Acknowledging that the performative power of speech acts comes from their embodied nature clarifies the relationship between speech and body/materiality. This relationship, in turn, reveals how speech also constitutes bodies and identities, in an iterative manner (Butler 1990, 1993). For example, insults have been described as instrumental in forging gay identities (Eribon 2004). The connection between (hostile) speech and identity is particularly true in the workplace, where women's bodies are performatively constituted in speech (Trethewey 1999), and where being pregnant and a mother is discursively woven into professional norms and organizational narratives (Gatrell 2013).

Studies that adopt a speech act perspective, including its Butlerian variant, put the analytical emphasis on the illocutionary level – what people do when they talk – and the perlocutionary – the consequences (anticipated or not) of their speech. This is consistent with Austin (1962: 99), for whom the guiding question was, "When we perform a locutionary act, we use speech: but in what way precisely are we using it on this occasion?" However, few studies have considered the locution itself – the fact that we use speech in the first place – as an empirically interesting fact. Turning the researchers' attention to the fact that people speak is not simply a matter of looking at how people choose talk as the appropriate "medium" or "channel" (for instance during performance appraisal; see Sorsa, Pälli, and Mikkola 2014). What is interesting is also what difference is made by the fact that someone speaks or not in a given situation.

Without addressing this question specifically, some studies have hinted at the problematic nature of someone speaking in a particular way at a particular time. For instance, someone might speak in Swahili to avoid being understood by French expatriates during a meeting (Cooren et al. 2007). Or, the fact that a non-member speaks during a meeting may trigger a collective conversation over membership

and whether or not it should be extended to that person (Bencherki and Snack 2016). Finally, some institutional contexts have specific procedures for turn-taking, meaning that the very fact of speaking out of turn may constitute a breach (Ilie 2010).

Recognizing the performative nature of talk, especially when fully taking into account the locutionary level, allows for a richer picture of what happens when people speak. However, beyond describing how talk occurs, some authors also argue that attention to *who speaks how and when* should be a normative duty for researchers.

## 5. Speaking up and voicing: The emancipatory facet of talk

As soon as we begin to consider speaking from a performative angle, the question of agency can be addressed: being able to speak is also being able to act within our human collectives, and being limited in the ability to speak is also a constraint on one's agency (see Ahearn 2001; Bencherki 2016; Brummans 2018). It has been suggested that, in organizational contexts, the ability to speak up and express one's voice depends on the person's power position, a relation that enforces the status quo (Islam and Zyphur 2005). Overcoming such limitations, including by defying them, thus becomes a political action through which a person reclaims their speech, their agency and their ability to participate in their community.

Reclaiming one's speech can be understood in the broader sense of the word, as for instance marginalized populations organize media interventions to have their perspective heard (Dreher 2010). In organizations, beliefs held by managers about their employees may deter workers from expressing ideas and voicing concerns, thus requiring them to overcome their fear of negative repercussion or act covertly to contribute to their organization (Morrison and Milliken 2000). Studies of people trying to make their collectivities better, despite being prevented opportunities to speak up, show that an important challenge is to be heard by the audience, or to have one's voice make a significant difference.

Yet, authors have pointed out the benefits of paying attention to people's voices. For instance, letting a diverse range of health professionals speak up improves patient safety (Weiss et al. 2014). As

another example, “open strategizing,” by allowing a wide range of stakeholders express their interests, offers the “requisite diversity” needed for strategic planning (Seidl and Werle 2018). A *Journal of Management Studies* special issue surveyed the range of situations where being inclusive of multiple voices would benefit an organization – for instance to raise ethical issues – but where those voices may not be heard (Morrison and Milliken 2003).

However, several authors also view attention to what people have to say as a normative duty, especially when listening to populations that are historically under-privileged or actively prevented from speaking (Spivak 1988). The responsibility of listening to these subaltern voices, in the absence of other avenues for expression, is incumbent on researchers. Research strategies must therefore be devised in ways that allow for listening to these people. For instance, ethnographers spend time with dispossessed communities, talk with them and feel it is their duty to report on their perspectives (Pal 2014). Researchers may also help people overcome linguistic limitations in multi-lingual settings (Barner-Rasmussen and Bor 2005). Interview strategies must be adapted to pay attention to what vulnerable populations have to say, including their refusal to speak, rather than expecting competent answers (Nagar-Ron and Motzafi-Haller 2011).

While some voices may be suppressed due to political or economic imbalance, some people are physically unable to talk in the way Western researchers expect them to. They may use a computer interface to “talk” and be perceived as lacking intelligence due to their disability, making the researcher an ally in translating and amplifying their voice (Ashby 2011). Similarly, intellectually disabled people may be unable to express their concerns, and researchers must specifically offer them an opportunity and means to speak up (McDonald, Kidney, and Patka 2013). Researchers must also take the time to listen to dying patients (Shalev 2010). Besides physical limitation, the inability to speak may have to do with *what* people are trying to express: indeed, some things, as in the case of trauma, may be unspeakable (Day 2005).

Giving a voice to others has been described as requiring a different form of theorizing. First, it must acknowledge the polyphonic nature of any situation that it attempts to describe and recognize that numerous voices may matter (Cooren and Sandler 2014). However, it must not presume that all of them are equally capable of expressing themselves, and therefore realize that it is also the researcher's duty to ensure strategies are available to listen on people's own terms (Letiche 2010). Second, scholars have warned that theorizing must not hide these voices behind the researcher's own speech, concepts and jargon (Krippendorff 2000). Listening attentively to multiple voices also means being ready to take the risk of not liking what they have to say (Grewal 2012).

Such an agenda for theoretical work has, in part, been embraced by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, as we saw above (Krippendorff 2000). In a more explicit way, the kind of interactional analysis EM/CA affords has been used to analyze organizational reality in terms of voices, using a perspective metaphorically termed "ventriloquism" (Cooren 2010; Cooren 2012). Ventriloquial analysis, however, extends previous research on how voice is given to others by being agnostic as to the nature of the voiceless beings who attempt to express themselves. Building on actor-network theory's notion that non-humans also participate in sociability (Latour 2005), ventriloquial analysis pays attention to how people speak on behalf of others (including absent people, things or principles – referred to as "figures") and position themselves as both made to say or do things because of them, and as making them say and do things in the interaction. For instance, a management consultant may legitimate a suggestion by presenting it as approved by the client organization's CEO, as following a well-established auditing model, or as reflecting concerns that employees expressed during focus groups. The consultant's ability to guide collective action thus depends on her ability to channel other voices through her own (Bourgoin, Bencherki, and Faraj 2019).

Through the notion of voice and by looking at how people practically distribute it by lending voice to some beings or not, it is thus possible to realize that it is not only researchers who feel responsible for helping others talk: it is a process that a variety of people engage in regularly, when they

tell a story about someone else, describe a document, or invoke a rule to lend authority to their actions (Benoit-Barné and Cooren 2009). Also, understanding how people give a voice to others helps better account for the distribution of agency and shows how people and things jointly constitute their collectives (Cooren 2010).

## 6. Conclusion: Speaking to create a shared world

By being attentive to the fact that people *speak* (or don't), how they do so and what they achieve in speaking – including lending their voice to other people and things – it is possible to devise a more balanced view of communication. First, it is more balanced by acknowledging that there is no reason to contrast speaking with writing, and that in fact the distinction between the two may not hold. In questioning this classical dichotomy, researchers may recognize more forms of "speaking" than just verbal speech and may be more mindful of the voices that are trying to express themselves. They may also be more aware that talk rarely comes alone, as any conversation also includes gestures, documents and other modalities as part of talk itself.

Second, this view of communication is balanced because it does not presume an imbalance between the sender trying to cast a message over a channel to a passive receiver. These distinctions also do not hold. Instead, communication is about people trying to do something together. The meaning of what they say depends on how they contribute to the ongoing interaction and to their joint activity. In other words, speaking is *performative*: it is an achievement, and it does things in its own right. This is all the more important when considering that the act of speaking, in itself, may make a difference at the *locutionary* level. Indeed, for people who are prevented from speaking by political or physical limitations, the ability to speak may not be a given, and they must overcome these constraints in a way that allows them to participate in collective life.

This leads to the third point: a balanced view of communication means being attentive to all voices equally and to how they are distributed among people and things. This may entail that it is the

researcher's duty to make sure all voices are heard. However, the researcher should not assume that they will take an expected form. They may be weaker voices or express themselves in surprising ways, and they may say things that make the researcher uncomfortable. Yet, being attentive to them means being careful not to hide them behind academic jargon and accepting them for what they are.

Adopting a better understanding of speaking is of particular relevance to management and organization scholars, as it's in the way voices are distributed that collectives of all sorts, including organizations, are brought into being (Taylor and Van Every 2000). Writing and other non-verbal elements can also make a difference in this distribution, but to matter they must be materialized in (multimodal) talk (Cooren 2010, 2018b). In better understanding how speaking operates, including by lending a voice to absent or speechless others, it is therefore possible to observe how ways of doing things (Vásquez et al. 2018), ethical norms (Matte and Bencherki 2019), and other organizational elements are materialized and can play a part in guiding collective action.

To suggest this balanced view of communication, we had to explore several theoretical perspectives, starting with Ong's (2012) history of orality and literacy, moving to ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Garfinkel 2002; Sacks 1992), to conversational lamination (Boden 1994), to text/conversation dynamics (Taylor and Van Every 2000), to speech act theory (Austin 1962; Butler 1997), then to perspectives on voicing (e.g., Morrison and Milliken 2003), and finishing with ventriloquial analysis (Cooren 2010). This range of perspectives, while it has a common thread, is indicative of the absence of a coherent research program on speaking, especially in the context of management and organization studies.

Future applied research on managerial communication will therefore need to be more precise about what "language," "talk," "speech," and "communication" mean. Too often, management studies employ these words in abstract ways, without being specific about the concrete practices that lie beneath them. As long as we remain evasive, we can paint categories in broad strokes and imagine oppositions between them, such as between orality and writing, or between theoretical perspectives. However, when

we pay closer attention to the empirical phenomena we are supposed to be describing, we then have a solid anchor to guide our theorizing in the right direction and realize that reality is both messier and more orderly than we thought.

Next, and relatedly, future research will need to describe precisely how actors themselves move across the alleged micro, mezzo and macro levels, and create their collectivity, without presuming that communication takes place "within" an organization that forms its so-called context. Those levels correspond to levels of vagueness in the analysis more than to any actual reality. Rules, hierarchies, coordination and the myriad of other phenomena that are of interest to management researchers are not abstract entities outside of talk and writing: they are accomplished concretely in the way people interact together and mobilize texts of all sorts, for instance through conversational lamination or through text/conversation dynamics (Boden 1994; Taylor and Van Every 2000). We must therefore analyze actual talk and interactions in search of organizing practices, rather than reduce speaking to people describing a pre-existing organizational reality. Such reduction would prevent us from understanding the profound impact speaking may have on organizational reality and would leave us bewildered at why things didn't go as expected – or, what is even more amazing, why they did.

Finally, management researchers must pay greater attention to the many voices that populate organizations. Too often, management research continues to presume that the most important voice is that of top managers and only concerns itself with interviewing people in higher ranks. However, the fact is that all speech is performative in its own way and, if some voices are more powerful than others, then this extra power must be explained. Indeed, as Butler (1999) pointed out, there is no "magic" in language's performativity and a lot of work is involved in making, say, a CEO's voice more powerful than that of a humble employee. Ignoring all that work not only limits our ability to understand the entire reality of an organization by focusing solely on a few, necessarily partial, voices, but also contributes to reproducing power relationships by assuming that it is natural for some people to sit at the top and for their contribution to be the only one that matters.

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