ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Rethinking the Ethnography of Communication's Conception of Value in the Context of Globalization

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*As a key approach to the study of language and social interaction within the field of communication, the ethnography of communication (EC) posits that speech communities value communication resources for their functions in the process of competent use. We argue that this conception of value creates theoretical blind spots for other types of value that derive from other processes besides competent use, such as the exchange and acquisition of communication resources. Drawing on recent anthropological scholarship and our own cross-cultural comparative case study of United States and Chinese students' accounts of learning Anglo-American public speaking, we claim that, from an ethnographic perspective, a communication resource has value insofar as speakers interpret it as an object of desire due to its function as a means to other valued entities or focal values in the context of relevant social processes.*

The global circulation of transcultural communication resources poses a theoretical challenge for the ethnography of communication (EC) as an approach to the study of language and social interaction (LSI) within the communication field. EC conceives of locally recognized patterns and styles of communication as communication resources to which speech community members ascribe function and value with reference to their competent use in the contexts of social interaction. From an indigenous point of view, EC posits, communication resources possess value

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because, insofar as they are used competently, they function as useful means toward various valued social ends of social interaction. However, recent anthropological scholarship and our own research reveal that speakers ascribe other types of value to communication resources that are globally available and often taught, marketed, bought, and sold *as* global. For example, learners of Anglo-American public speaking in the United States (Boromisza-Habashi & Reinig, 2018), in Japan (Dunn, 2014), and in public speaking clubs on Chinese university campuses (Hizi, 2018), and in urban areas (Hampel, 2017) value public speaking not only because they wish to give better public speeches or presentations but also because they experience *learning* public speaking as the appropriation of a commodity, and as a technology of the self that provides them with desirable entrepreneurial, modern, global selves. EC's tendency to treat competent use as the principal source of value creates descriptive and analytic blind spots which, we suggest, can be remedied by decoupling value and function from competent use, conceptually grounding value in desire, and identifying relevant social processes (including, but not limited to, use) as the fundamental source of communication resources' value. In doing so, we contribute to EC theory in two ways (Philipsen, 1989): by refining the discovery model of cultural value, and by highlighting cultural variation in value ascription.

In the following two sections we first elaborate EC's current theory of value, and then discuss recent anthropological research that poses challenges to that theory.

## The competent use of communication resources as the principal source of value

A central tenet of LSI approaches to communication is that the meaning of things people do with language—such as speak, write, combine language with embodied actions or visual signs—is to be found in their functionality in the context of social interaction (Sanders, 2005). As a major LSI approach, EC maintains that a speaker can use language meaningfully if they are in possession of two kinds of competencies: the ability to *select* the appropriate communication resources for the purpose of social interaction from a repertoire their speech community makes available to them, and the ability to *deploy* those resources in the process of social interaction in locally recognized and appropriate ways toward locally recognized and appropriate social ends (Carbaugh & Boromisza-Habashi, 2015). In this view, the value of speech is tied to indigenous distinctions between more and less competent participation in social interaction, with more competent participation producing greater value, and less competent participation producing lesser value (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2017). The fact that speech communities sometimes ascribe value to incompetence (e.g., speaking English with a "sexy" French accent, see Saville-Troike, 2003) does not alter the grounding of value in competence.

In EC, the association between function, competence and the value of speech is founded on Hymes's (1972, 1992) critique of Chomsky's theory of generative

grammar. Hymes argued that, from the perspective of ordinary speakers attempting to engage one another in meaningful conversation, competence is tied to the socially acceptable use of locally available linguistic resources in the context of social interaction, rather than the ability to formulate grammatically correct sentences. Grammatical correctness does not guarantee that members of a speech community will find a particular utterance competent and appropriate. To illustrate this point, Hymes (1974) used the example of the anthropologist Stanley Newman who, while conducting fieldwork among the Yokuts in California, learned that his lengthy, albeit grammatically correct, word constructions and sentences violated the community's cultural preference for simplicity and repetition in speech. Speech community members constantly evaluate the social appropriateness and esthetic quality of the context-bound, strategic, social goal-oriented communicative performance of individual speakers, and cultivate local expectations about "how we may traffic in speech" (Johnstone & Marcellino, 2010, p. 60).

Subsequent ethnographic research produced insight into three key aspects of the relationship between competence, function and value. Hymes (1996) and others (Heath, 1983; Morgan, 2014; Silverstein, 1996; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Woolard, 1985) pursued an interest in the uneven distribution of valued linguistic resources in education, and the social discrimination resulting from it. They showed that linguistic varieties and communication practices are associated with varying degrees of social prestige, and argued that speakers' (in)ability to deploy institutionally sanctioned forms of narration solidified majority and minority speakers' marginal location in the social hierarchy. As Bourdieu had done in his work on legitimate language (1977, 1991), these scholars acknowledged that the attainment of valued communication resources (styles, dialects, etc.) is of significance to those who seek to rise, or simply participate, in the social hierarchy dominated by a privileged group and its privileged style. Studies of language and racial discrimination (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Rosa, 2019) and of linguistic diversity and social justice (Piller, 2016) extend this line of inquiry into the present day. Second, EC scholars working in the communication field investigated the community-constituting function of the competent use of valued communication resources. Gendered ways of speaking such as "speaking like a man" in Teamsterville (Philipsen, 1975) or women's use of the *sajiao* style in Taiwan (Yueh, 2017), ritual forms of expression like *dugri* in Israel (Katriel, 2004), competing interpretations of "hate speech" in Hungary (Boromisza-Habashi, 2013), and even embodied, nonlinguistic forms of communication such as the Finnish matter-of-fact nonverbal style *asiallinen* (Wilkins, 2005) are recognized locally as valued forms of expression *and* as sources of communal identity. Third, cultural discourse analysts have taken active interest in systems of cultural beliefs that undergird the value and function of competent communication, particularly between humans and non-human actors such as nature (Carbaugh, 2005; Cerulli, 2017; Scollo, 2004), a deity (Molina-Markham, 2012), and cars equipped with speech interfaces (Molina-Markham, van Over, Lie, & Carbaugh, 2016).

## The challenge of globalization

Globalization as a process that dislocates certain communication resources from their speech communities of origin and gives them global significance prompts ethnography to reckon with the fact that competent use is not the only value-generating social process speakers recognize. Linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists influenced by Marx's theory of value investigate the relationship between language and processes of commodification in capitalist economies which more often than not traverse social, national, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Marx, whose chief contribution to economic value theory was arguably the insight that exchanges of goods were not individual acts but expressions and affirmations of a social totality supporting them (Heinrich, 2012), held that commodities form when goods take on exchange value in addition to use value. At a basic level of analysis, the use value of goods derives from the process of their use; their exchange value derives from their exchange for other commodities, including money, in the context of particular socio-historical contexts. Upon further examination, the relationship between the use and exchange value of commodities appears more complex (see, for example, Agha, 2011). However, we refrain from discussing these complexities given that our primary interest here is drawing distinctions between various types of value, and not the relationships and interactions among various types.

Anthropologies of globalization provided ethnographic evidence that expanding analytic attention to the commodification of objects other than material goods, and studying how any object can pass into, and out of, "the commodity phase of [its] social life" (Appadurai, 1986, p. 13) was warranted. By showing links between language and commodification, linguistic anthropologists have argued that languages could play a part in capitalist modes of production in three ways: by becoming a form of commodifiable labor, particularly in the transnational service economy (Cameron, 2000), by contributing to the commodification and global circulation of other abstract or material goods (Heller & Duchêne, 2016), or by becoming commodities themselves exchangeable for other goods (Agha, 2011; Irvine, 1989). For example, local varieties of a given language can be used to commodify regional identities (Heller, 2003) and authenticity in the tourism and marketing industries (Heller, 2010). Others have provided evidence that certain communication resources can become commodities themselves. The global discourse of soft skills as necessary for employment and career success provides the rationale for combining everyday communication resources into "skills" which, in turn, can be sold to speakers through various forms of training, transformed into elements of individuals' skills sets, and exchanged for employment and wages (Urciuoli, 2008; Urciuoli & LaDousa, 2013).

Public speaking is a particularly interesting example of the commodification of communication resources. Surveys of hiring managers and human resources professionals regularly indicate that businesses rank "effective communication" as one of the most important soft skills job candidates can bring to their organizations, and regard

colleges responsible for communication skills training (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). We have observed that public speaking instructors, teaching materials, and students justify the course as a key site of the acquisition of effective communication skills with purchase in the corporate world. This type of purchase is often expressed in monetary terms in popular media. Citing Warren Buffett's advice that possessing communication skills raises one's worth by 50% (Clifford, 2018), Gallo (2019) claimed that public speaking as a skill was "the equivalent of cold, hard cash" (para 16).

It is important to note, however, that the use and exchange value of soft skills can be different from the value of the communication resources they comprise. For instance, the use value of various speech genres associated with public speaking as a secondary speech genre can vary greatly. Speakers can use public speaking to educate, to celebrate, or to persuade others, and thereby increase their social capital. Speakers who have mastered the art of public speaking can be hired to give presentations at various occasions. However, public speaking *as a skill* takes on a value of its own. Given the widespread demand for skilled labor, job applicants and workers in the contemporary labor market are required to cast their selves as bundles of skills (Urciuoli, 2008). Public speaking as a skill can accrue value as an element of the particularly important skill-bundle called "effective communication skills." The college-level public speaking course is a primary site of the packaging and dissemination of public speaking as a skill. In this context, the use value of public speaking is constituted by learners' newly-instilled capacity to give more compelling presentations (mostly in corporate environments) and, perhaps more importantly, their ability to use their new skills for the joint transformation of their selves (as bundles of skills) and career prospects. "Public speaking," Urciuoli (2008) wrote, "is commodified as presentation skills, with its use-value in its promise of self-transformation and increased profit (economic or symbolic)" (p. 221). The exchange value of public speaking-as-skill, then, derives from the actual social process of exchanging transformed, skilled labor for gainful employment.

The scholarship we have reviewed thus far usefully accounts for the value of communication resources derived from speakers' capacity to utilize those resources in social processes of use and exchange to secure further valued objects such as social status, employment, influence, respect, money, and so forth. It also explains how a global network of institutions invested in training or employing a labor force equipped with soft skills facilitates the global dissemination of particular communication resources and the formation of a transcultural commodity ecumene (Appadurai, 1986). Finally, this scholarship calls attention to the fact that multiple hierarchies of value can guide the evaluation of communication resources in particular communities of speakers. Certain resources may have relatively high use value and relatively low exchange value. Local forms of greetings, for example, are useful in societies across social contexts and around the world but their exchange value is low. By contrast, public speaking appears to have high exchange value on the global scene but its use value may be limited in societies such as China where opportunities for Western-style public expression are limited (Hampel, 2017).

A key theoretical limitation of scholarship that studies the value of communication resources is the exclusive attention to two value-generating and value-affirming social processes, namely the (competent) use and the exchange of those resources. As we show in this paper, there is at least one more social process with reference to which speakers ascribe function and value to communication resources: their acquisition. From speakers' perspective, the very activity of acquiring communication resources—including attaining the ability to use them competently—produces value *prior to their competent use* as a result of what they experience as a transformation of their selves.

Existing anthropological studies of language socialization—the process of children and adult learners becoming particular types of speakers and community members in the course of learning certain linguistic forms (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011)—have provided evidence that some adult speakers experience self-transformation while acquiring communication resources. Japanese learners explain that, as a result of learning public speaking, they have become more *sekkyokuteki* (positive, active, assertive) (Dunn, 2014). Beyond public speaking, Danish corporate workers also see learning English as key to the development of a global or international mind-set (Lønsmann, 2017). By learning the win-win style of negotiation, a Chinese international MBA student in the United States comes to see herself as a better businesswoman along with her peers (Shi, 2010). Adult Gaelic learners in Scotland seek and develop a sense of cultural integration and ambassadorship (McEwan-Fujita, 2010). Graduate students in the United States experience their own transformation into ideal academic apprentices by learning to index stances of cooperativeness and interdependence in conversations with faculty (Rudolph, 1994). Thus, the acquisition of new communicative resources often becomes a technology of the self (Boromisza-Habashi & Reinig, 2018; Urciuoli & LaDousa, 2013).

## A theoretical intervention: Grounding value in desire

In the light of recent anthropological scholarship it seems warranted to decouple the value and function of communication resources from their competent use, and to construct a theory of value that can encompass use, exchange, and acquisitive value. The foundations of such a theory are available from the Harvard Values Study (Powers, 2000). Under the theoretical influence of Parsons, notable anthropologists affiliated with the project such as Clyde Kluckhohn, Ethel Albert, and Evon Vogt argued that culturally valued entities were objects of desire identified at the social scale of the group or community. In human experience, any entity counts as a cultural desirable to the extent that the group or community holds that members ought to want those entities. Groups expect their members to act toward valued objects, and sanction them when they act toward cultural non-desirables in the name of individual desires. Value is, thus, "a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action" (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 395). On these

theoretical grounds, the Values Study generated a classification of values (Albert, 1956) which included focal values (culturally central intrinsic values) and valued entities (objects, feeling states, situations and activities that serve as means toward attaining higher order values).

The conception of value as a culturally variable system of desirables that shapes human action prompts us to conceive of Anglo-American public speaking as a valued entity, that is, as a communication resource speakers regard as a means toward attaining a range of further desirables. This move marks a departure from EC's traditional way of tying the value and function of communication resources exclusively to competent use. By associating value with desire, we move to a higher level of abstraction in order to create analytic capacity for the identification of a broader range of value-producing and value-affirming social processes in speakers' experience. We accept that, in the process of competent use, public speaking functions as a desirable means toward such other desirables as identification and persuasion (Hansen, 1996), esthetic enjoyment (Bauman, 1977), and positive self-presentation (Boromisza-Habashi, Hughes, & Malkowski, 2016). But in the process of exchange, public speaking also functions as a desirable means toward other desirables such as tuition fees, textbook sales, and a set of skills exchangeable for gainful employment. Additionally, in the process of acquisition, public speaking functions as a desirable means toward self-transformation, including the attainment of modern, global, entrepreneurial selves. To summarize, *a communication resource has value insofar as speakers interpret it as an object of desire due to its function as a means to other valued entities or focal values in the context of relevant social processes.* This view of value is consistent with a recent explication of symbolic value in EC (Noy, 2017) as a dynamic system of "ongoing relationships (rather than predetermined values), where communication is continuously negotiated and evaluated" (p. 6).

As the concepts of use and exchange value are relatively well developed in the EC and broader anthropological literature, we devote the next section to a case study of acquisitive value in the public speaking classroom. The argument we advance is that although globally available communication resources such as Anglo-American public speaking may be ascribed acquisitive value across cultural boundaries, such value still has a "cultural" character in the sense that speakers articulate it with reference to local, cultural models of self-transformation. We first briefly sketch the US and Chinese cultural contexts in which speakers ascribe value to Anglo-American public speaking, and then analyze particular examples of acquisitive value ascriptions.

## Anglo-American public speaking in the US and China: A case study of acquisitive value

Besides relevant scholarship, our theoretical claims about value are grounded in a multi-year, multi-sited, collaborative ethnographic research project designed

to investigate the social and economic processes of the global dissemination of the Anglo-American speech genre commonly known as *public speaking* from the perspective of everyday social actors. Contrary to the dominant, pedagogically-oriented communication scholarship on public speaking, this project approaches public speaking as a globally circulating communication resource consisting of a set of practices whose cultural roots extend into Greek antiquity via more recent oratorical training in the Anglo world (Boromisza-Habashi, Hughes, & Malkowski, 2016; Rossette-Crake, 2019). Global public speaking is valued, learned, traded, consumed, and put to use in actual, observable, local contexts. Today, public speaking courses are available to speakers around the world. The global reach of, and local institutional support for, this speech genre has been widely documented (Carbaugh, 2005; Dunn, 2014; Miller, 2002; Pan, Scollon, & Scollon, 2002; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). The global "travels" of public speaking are propelled by such institutions as TED talks, self-help courses such as the Dale Carnegie system, public speaking clubs like Toastmasters, public speaking competitions, and college-level basic and advanced public speaking courses. The research project was designed to be a study of translocalism using a multisited methodology (Kraidy & Murphy, 2008), an investigation of local communication on a global scene which recognizes that "the local needs to be understood as the space where global forces become recognizable in form and practice as they are enmeshed in local human subjectivity and social agency" (p. 339). In the context of such investigations, the global takes shape not as social organization and activity on an abstract, supra-cultural scale but as a global network of local particularities connected by translocal communication phenomena, such as public speaking.

In this article, we draw on one element of this project, a cross-cultural comparison of U.S. American and Chinese undergraduate students' accounts of their experience learning public speaking. Such comparison allows us to develop insights not only about value but also about variation in value ascriptions in two particular socio-cultural scenes where public speaking has different social histories.

Students formulate their accounts in distinct historical and socio-cultural contexts. The history of popular public speaking education in the United States can be traced back to the early 18th century (Sproule, 2012). U.S. interest in learning public speaking continues unabated to the present day. The tradition of public speaking flourished in ancient China until the Sui Dynasty (518–618 CE) introduced the imperial examination system which precipitated the shift of focus in formal education from speaking to writing (Li & Li, 2014; Wang, 2003). Traditional pedagogical focus on writing as opposed to speaking (Dong, 1994, Li & Li, 2014; Zhang & Ardasheva, 2019) continued until the 1990s, and was only briefly interrupted by the introduction of public speaking into the elementary school curriculum during the Republican China Period (1912–1949). Strong policy emphasis on English language education since the 1980s and the appearance of televised English speech contests led to a surge of English-language public speaking classes throughout the Chinese educational system (Lucas, 2013).

At Chinese institutes of higher education, public speaking courses that follow the Anglo-American model are distinct from courses on oral English: while the latter teach technical proficiency in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, the former train students to "communicate" with audiences (Lucas, 2013) following a contemporary U.S. cultural ideology of oratory which imagines public speaking as an intimate, direct, and personal conversation between speaker and audience (Boromisza-Habashi, Hughes, & Malkowski, 2016). Both types of courses are typically offered in English departments.

On university campuses and beyond, public speaking pedagogy in China is shaped and supported by the discourse of "education for quality" (*suzhi jiaoyu*) which is most clearly expressed in a 1999 policy document of the same name (Hizi, 2018; Woronov, 2008). As an ideologically infused bureaucratic and popular discourse, "education for quality" responds to a popular concern with the low "quality" (*suzhi*) of the Chinese population which keeps the country from gaining respect on the global stage. English public speaking courses fit into this discourse as a key means of boosting the "quality" of Chinese citizens for three reasons. In China, the English language is widely regarded as an index of modernity, thus learning English is seen as a means of modernization (Hu & Alsagoff, 2010). Second, English public speaking contributes to the demand in "education for quality" for producing a new generation of modern, global, entrepreneurial individuals who are autonomous confident, creative, and emotionally expressive (Hizi, 2018). Finally, rather than seeing those character traits and related communication skills as intrinsic goods, a common interpretation of "education for quality" which, according to Woronov (2008), leans toward Social Darwinism suggests that these ensure individual survival in the cutthroat competition of the global market economy, outside the support system of traditional family structures (Hampel, 2017).

Although the challenges of succeeding in the global market economy also concerns undergraduate students in the United Stated, public speaking pedagogy leads them to assign higher priority to individual self-expression and self-realization, at least in the context of the public speaking class (Boromisza-Habashi & Reinig, 2018). Students who grow up in the country begin to practice basic forms of public speaking such as "show and tell" at an early age (Saville-Troike, 2003) and continue practicing it throughout their primary and secondary education. In that process, they experience learning public speaking as the preparation of the self to be presented to attentive audiences in an eloquent, persuasive, memorable manner. By the time they enroll in college-level courses, most U.S. students have at least a passing familiarity with practicing public speaking as a speech genre. Chinese students face a steeper learning curve: although they may be familiar with public speaking from televised contests and TED talks, they have not practiced the genre, they need to develop sufficient English language proficiency, and they must transcend the learning habits into which a writing and testing-heavy educational system socialized them.

In order to investigate how students in the United States and China ascribe acquisitive value to public speaking we adopted EC's interest in observable language use. We

regard observable language use as the site where speakers mobilize locally available discursive resources to produce, contest, and transform shared interpretations and enactments of social life. The comparative study we report here is part of a larger, translocal (Kraidy & Murphy, 2008) project that seeks to unearth the dynamics of a global speech economy in which resources such as public speaking surface and take root in particular socio-cultural settings and local speech economies.

The point of departure for our project was an earlier investigation by the first author (Boromisza-Habashi & Reinig, 2018) designed to understand how U.S. American students in the basic public speaking classroom narrated their experiences of overcoming public speaking anxiety (PSA). At his home institution, the basic public speaking course was available to students from all majors and all years. Students in the semester-long course learned from a customized edition of Lucas's *The Art of Public Speaking* (2012). In order to solicit PSA narratives, the first author held 9 focus group sessions ($n = 27$). Video from these sessions were fully transcribed and analyzed for ascriptions of cultural value to public speaking as a speech genre.

On the heels of this project, the first author invited the second author to collaborate on a project comparing U.S. and Chinese students' PSA narratives for the purpose of investigating whether value ascriptions were culturally variable. In China, the course was offered to second and third-year English majors. The language of instruction was English, and students were required to use a recent, mass-market English-language edition of the same textbook U.S. students used at the time of the first author's fieldwork. The second author attempted to collect narratives of overcoming PSA at her home institution in China, Yunnan University. She conducted 13 focus groups ($n = 71$), video data from which were also fully transcribed.

Early on into the process of data collection the second author recognized that Chinese students produced almost no narrative accounts of their experiences with PSA; hence their discursive preferences prevented us from comparing narratives. Consequently, we sought to identify another linguistic practice speakers in both groups used to perform value ascriptions for the purpose of cultural comparison. After reviewing U.S. and Chinese focus group transcripts, we followed the EC methodology of focusing on key metaphors (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981) students used to articulate their experience of learning public speaking. Key metaphors enable speakers to interpret and validate complex experiences by selectively developing some of their locally observed dimensions. As we show below, the metaphors students applied to the experience of learning public speaking allowed them to validate that experience by highlighting the self-transformation dimension of learning. Chinese students most frequently used the metaphor *duan-lian* (training, literally: to forge iron in the fire) (130 occurrences) to characterize learning public speaking; the first author identified *growth* as the most frequently occurring key metaphor with the same function in the U.S. focus group data (14 occurrences). Due to the relatively sparse presence of *growth* in the U.S. data we validated the distinctiveness and regularity of its use by accomplishing the massive overdetermination of patterns

(Agar, 1996/2008), by looking across field notes and textual evidence the first author had previously collected.

Next, we created collections of episodes in the data where students reflected on the learning process using key metaphors. We analyzed these episodes with the purpose of identifying how students interpreted learning public speaking as a desirable means of action toward higher order desirables (Albert, 1956). We relied on cultural discourse theory (Carbaugh, 2007, 2011; Katriel & Livio, 2019) for a heuristic framework for identifying speakers' higher order desirables. Cultural discourse theory posits that language use comments on and evaluates everyday social life in social groups along six radiants of meaning: personhood, communicative action, social relations, feelings, relationship to place, and temporality. We used these six radiants to identify locally salient modes of self-transformation.

## Learning public speaking as processes of *duan-lian* and *growth*

The universities where our study participants took public speaking courses, and the regions where these universities are located, are not entirely dissimilar. Both the University of Colorado Boulder (CU) and Yunnan University (YU) are public universities and major regional centers of higher education with a roughly equal student population (CU: 33,200; YU: 31,100). Both institutions contribute significantly to the local economies of their host cities, Boulder, CO, and Kunming. The state of Colorado and Yunnan Province are widely recognized in the United States. and China, respectively, for tourism and a thriving natural environment. As landlocked regions, neither Colorado nor Yunnan are as economically significant as the coastal regions of the United States and China, respectively.

There is, of course, a multitude of differences between the two institutions and the cultural, socio-political, and economic contexts in which they operate. The difference most salient to our argument here is one that directly shaped the ways students experienced the course where public speaking was taught to them as a soft (communication) skill. English as the language of instruction added a layer of difficulty for students at YU, despite the fact that enrollment is restricted to English majors who can be reasonably expected to have above average linguistic proficiency. Ironically, as students pointed out to us, English majors' spoken English was often weaker than that of students from other majors due to the heavily writing-based mode of instruction. At CU, by contrast, the vast majority of learners speak English as their first language. For Chinese students, as for many other speakers around the world who have not grown up speaking the language, English is not simply another second language. Proficiency in English, particularly Standard English, is more highly valued in the global context than proficiency in any other language (Piller, 2011). In spite of a variety of policy efforts, however, the quality of English language education in China remains low (Piller, 2016). Feeling the pressure to achieve sufficient English proficiency, Chinese university students and young professionals seek out a

variety of formal and informal contexts in which they can practice speaking English. Beyond the formality of skills-oriented university courses such as public speaking they gather in so-called "English corners" on university campuses to practice the language by giving impromptu speeches or holding debates on particular topics. At YU, the College English Teaching Department sponsors "English corners" open to all students. Some universities also have public speaking clubs (Hizi, 2018); young urban professionals gather in Toastmasters clubs (Hampel, 2017). These gatherings offer cherished opportunities to students not only to practice their English but also to expand their social networks and to showcase their emerging ability to speak to, and hold the attention of, strangers.

As we see in the excerpt below, Chinese students typically describe their experience of self-transformation in the public speaking (*yan-jiang*) course as a process of *duan-lian* ("training"), and present an outward- or interactionally-oriented model of self-transformation. Here, a student's account of the advice she would give to future public speaking students serves as a typical example of this orientation.

(1) Excerpt from Focus Group #10

5795    S4    我觉得我要对他们说的话，肯定就是，会说一下演讲的好处，因为，首先就是说一

5796          下，那个，演讲，肯定会锻炼到你，因为现在就是，比如大学生嘛，刚刚从高中，步入

5797          到，哦，十多年了，在那个学校里呆了十多年了，所以他没有什么锻炼的机会，然后，

5798          现在有一个机会放在你面前，就是说，肯定得争取一下，它，锻炼的层面会有很多，就

5799          像刚才说的，综合知识的提升，表达能力呀，应变能力呀，还有就是，从你，反正，每

5800          一次上台就是一个机会，每一次上台就是一个机会，就是一次锻炼，在这个锻炼的过程

5801          中呢，我觉得就是自己，会变得，越来越有自信，然后，表达能力也有，一

5802          次比一次提升，也就是说，每次都会进步一点点。

(2) Translation of (1) by second author

5795    S4    I think if I were to advise them I would definitely talk about the benefits of

                    public speaking. Because, first of all, I would

5796          mention that public speaking will surely *dualian* you. Because, now that you

                    are a university student, fresh out of high school after,

5797        uh, ten plus years, you have been in school for ten plus years, you have had

            very few opportunities for *duan-lian*.

5798        Then, there is an opportunity right in front of you. That is to say, you must

            seize it. There are different levels of *duan-lian*, many levels,

5799        many, like what others [focus group participants] have said before,

            comprehensive knowledge, language abilities, quickness of response and,

5800        above all, every time you go up to speak you have an opportunity, an

            opportunity for *duan-lian*. In this process of

5801        *duan-lian*, I feel that I myself have become more and more confident, and

            my language abilities have

5802        improved every time. That is to say, every time you make a bit of progress.

This excerpt illustrates a local interpretation of learning public speaking as a rare and invaluable opportunity for *duan-lian*, which sets the course apart from the rest of the curriculum. *Duan-lian* is described as the acquisition of a comprehensive (linguistic, cognitive, psychological) competence through incremental change that results from intentionally and periodically subjecting the self to an unfamiliar mode of social engagement ("every time you go up to speak," line 5800) in a language imbued with social prestige (English). Change is precipitated by the psychological equivalent of forging iron in the fire, hammering the soft metal until it takes its desired, hard form.

The analysis of the Chinese focus group data shows that students expected to become better communicators as a result of *duan-lian*. Besides increasing their linguistic proficiency, students also expected to be able to give better formal (*yan-jiang*, including impromptu *tuo-gao yan-jiang*) and informal (*pu-tong jiang-hua*) speeches that are convincing (*shuo-fu*). They also expected to hold the attention of their audiences by sharing their experiences (*jing-li*) and life stories (*gu-shi*). Relating interpersonally with strangers (*mo-sheng-ren*), foreigners (*wai-guo-ren*), and superiors (*ling-dao*) were also frequently named as desirable goals. They expected to feel less nervous (*jin-zhang*) and more relaxed (*fang-song*) and natural (*zi-ran*) when speaking in public. Finally, students expected to feel more confident when relocating from the audience to the *tai* (stage, platform).

The metaphor animating U.S. students' accounts of acquiring public speaking was personal *growth*. The growth metaphor was present in the Chinese data as well (*cheng-zhang* "personal growth") but its use was relatively less prominent than in the U.S. data. (CU students mentioned *training* in relation to public speaking only one

time.) The following excerpt illustrates the U.S. use of *growth* as the description of transformation in the public speaking course.

(3) Excerpt from Focus Group #7

| 283 | S2 | I just think it's a, like a lifelong skill that you're taught, something you can |
|---|---|---|
| 284 | | take basically anywhere. And not just teaching you a skill, but |
| 285 | | teaching about yourself, cuz still I'm just very into the idea that you learn |
| 286 | | so much about yourself through these public speaking courses, just |
| 287 | | learning your styles and your strengths and your weaknesses, just seeing |
| 288 | | what works for you. It allows you to better discover yourself, I think, in a |
| 289 | | very extreme sense. Not – in a very extreme environment, where like you |
| 290 | | know you're in – like I forget the statistic, but it's like most people like |
| 291 | | fear public speaking more than most things, and just like – yeah, it's just |
| 292 | | like in that sort of pressure, you really start to learn your tendencies, your |
| 293 | | weaknesses, your strengths, and just what works for you. You know, it's |
| 294 | | like just – just how it works, I guess. |
| 295 | S1 | So you – you find out a lot about yourself under pressure. |
| 296 | S2 | Exactly. |
| 297 | S1 | Yeah. |
| 298 | S2 | It forces you to *grow*, and it forces you to learn. |

*Growth* is portrayed here as an ongoing process that takes places under constant "pressure" and is oriented inward ("learn so much about yourself," lines 285–286; "discover yourself," line 288; "start to learn your tendencies, your weaknesses, your strengths," lines 292–293). This process is inevitable; "it's ( . . . ) just how it works" (lines 294–295).

In U.S. students' accounts, *growth* is expected to lead to "personal success," increased "self-esteem" and "self-control." "Convincing" and building personal relations with "friends" and "strangers" are also desirable outcomes in the context of interpersonal relations. Acquiring public speaking can help one feel more "confident," less "scared" or "nervous," and it can allow one to leave their "comfort zone" and speak "up there," "in front of people."

The patterned use of metaphors warrants their interpretation as culturally distinct models of self-transformation. The analysis of all episodes in which Chinese and U.S. students mentioned *duan-lian* and *growth*, respectively, yielded a more elaborate interpretation of the two models. The two models were partially similar, and partially distinct. Both models cast learners as becoming better persons than those who did not learn public speaking (*personhood, temporality*) by attaining the ability to communicate better (*communicative action*), to have better relationships with their audiences (*social relations*), to feel better about performing public speaking (*feeling*), and to have a better relationship to those physical places where public speaking occurs (*relationship to place*). In addition, both models presuppose discontinuity between the internal world of one's self and an external world. They suggest that learning public speaking subjects the individual to unfamiliar experiences and unfamiliar situations as a result of which they experience discomfort (pressure, pain, and anxiety). Being subjected to such discomfort by the course feels coercive. However, once the individual willingly succumbs to the discomfort of learning public speaking they assume ownership of the process which takes the shape of conscious work on the self. The result of such work is self-discovery, self-improvement, and the possession of improved speaking skills.

There are, however, significant distinctions as well between the two models. *Duan-lian* suggests that the process of self-improvement takes place primarily in interaction with an unfamiliar world external to the individual. Public speaking provides individual speakers with a rare platform (*ping-tai*) to speak to (relative) strangers. This platform blends physical and metaphorical experience: once a speaker climbs onto a stage they have a platform to speak (*shang-qu/shang-tai yan-jiang*). On this platform, where learners are forced to address strangers in a second language under the scrutiny of their instructors, and the demands of the increasing one's "quality" for the global market economy, students experience being molded according to the demands of a strange—and sometimes hostile—linguistic, social, and economic landscape. *Growth*, by contrast, locates self-improvement primarily in the interiority of the individual. The speaker has grown increasingly aware of their own self and, in possession of that awareness, they are able to make more informed rhetorical decisions as they project their interiority toward the external world of audiences. Second, while *duan-lian* toughens the self to withstand the precarious experience of public expression, *growth* opens up the self to audiences. Third, the *duan-lian* model casts the acts of learning and performing public speaking as opportunities to be sought out for the purpose of further *duan-lian*. Novice speakers enact agency over their own selves by subjecting themselves to public speaking situations time and time again—an incremental process that is captured quite precisely in the image of forging iron in the fire. This interpretation carries the historic legacy of the Cultural Revolution in China when young people in urban areas were advised to give up the comfort of their homes, roam the countryside, immerse themselves in the hardscrabble lifestyle of the rural working class, and thereby *duan-lian* themselves. *Growth*, on the other hand, casts the act of learning and performing public speaking

as inevitably resulting in self-transformation. Once the individual owns the process of self-transformation they cannot not grow.

Chinese and U.S. students' accounts of self-transformation in the public speaking course show that the acquisitive value of public speaking as a communication resource is, at least in part, culturally variable with regard to how speakers imagine their self-transformation. At both YU and at CU, students reported that the acquisition of public speaking moved them toward the attainment of a focal value (a better self) and further valued entities associated with that self, such as better soft (communication) skills, better relationships to audiences, better feelings of self-awareness and confidence, and a better relationship to place (standing "up there," in front of strangers). This focal value and valued entities are translocal and circulate globally in the context of modernity (Cameron, 2000) thanks to their dissemination by expert systems (Giddens, 1990) embodied in textbooks and self-help manuals. Students' accounts differed with regard to how they imagined the locus and process of their self-transformation, and the nature of the communication skills they acquired (public speaking in English as a foreign vs. native language).

These observations warrant the claim that, in order to fully account for the acquisitive value of globally circulating communication resources from speakers' perspectives, EC must capture the transcultural *and* the cultural dimensions of that value. Ethnographers need to keep one eye on the status of those resources as transcultural objects of desire, a status grounded in what speakers interpret as their transformative function; their other eye needs to be on the culturally variable models of self-transformation speakers use to interpret their experience of acquiring those resources.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that the ethnography of communication (EC) has more to say about the value of communication resources than previously thought. Due to its historical development in the LSI tradition, EC's conception of value and function became tightly attached to competent use. EC posited that communication resources were valuable insofar as speakers saw them as having pragmatic and social functions that could be realized in the process of their competent use. To increase EC's analytic power, we advocate conceptually decoupling value and function from competent use, and grounding the conception of value in desire. From that vantage point, we see speakers ascribe value to communication resources that have either use, exchange, or acquisition value. We used the example of a globally circulating communication resource, Anglo-American public speaking, to illustrate these three types of value, and presented a cross-cultural comparison of the acquisitive value of this resource to highlight its transcultural and cultural dimensions.

These insights open up possibilities for further theoretical work by ethnographers of communication and others. Although our empirical work led us to focus on three types of value (use, exchange, and acquisitive) we do not argue that these are the

*only* types of value speakers ascribe to communication resources. The model we offer for identifying value from speakers' perspective—a communication resource has value insofar as speakers interpret it as an object of desire due to its function as a means to other valued entities or focal values in the context of relevant social processes—can be used to capture other types of relevant values and social processes. Further, this approach to value calls for empirical and theoretical investigations of interactions among value types, including the interaction between commodification and acquisitive value ascriptions. Expanding EC's explanatory power by rethinking its approach to value sets up the approach to produce significant contributions to the emerging body of value theory that shifts attention from the normative evaluation of everyday practices to the operations of value immanent in such practices (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Hall, Levon, & Milani, 2019).

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