Theme issue contribution

Design and the Polysemy of Value: On a problem within the language of valuation studies

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Abstract

Value and valuation are notoriously difficult terms, because they mean very different things in different contexts for different scholars. This problem can be described in linguistic terms as "polysemy". In this article, I propose to reformulate the problem of value through the lens of polysemy as a problem within language. I offer an alternative to approaches that either narrow down value to one particular definition or disregard it altogether, turning value into a container concept for a variety of concerns. I seek thereby to avoid the twin risks of fragmentation or smothering. Following the lead of ordinary language philosophy, I distinguish between three different "grammars of value". Scholars address value differently depending on their grammar. This shows best in the ways they present value as an intuitively intelligible phenomenon, and in the ways in which they challenge such intuitive understandings of value in their studies. To illustrate these grammatical distinctions, I refer to ethnographic studies of design practices, including excerpts from my own research in a German architecture office.

Keywords: semiotics; methodology; actor–network theory; pragmatism; performativity; ordinary language philosophy

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Introduction

If we want to follow the editors' call and reformulate what valuation studies is about (Board of Editors 2020), we must start at its basic methodological concepts. "Value", as well as "to valuate" and "valuation" are notoriously difficult terms. Dating back to the first editorial note of this journal (Helgesson and Muniesa 2013) and its oft-cited pragmatist sources (Dewey 1939), scholars have often acknowledged this difficulty and pointed to the terms' polysemy. Value and valuation can mean very different things in different contexts, and sometimes even in the same context. The problem of the "polysemy of value" comes in the shape of (i) the difference between value (the thing/noun) and valuation (the activity/verb), (ii) different verbs with a shared root in value (evaluate, valuate, valorise), (iii) semantic differences across languages (French: évaluer and valoriser; German: bewerten, aufwerten, abwerten, entwerten, verwerten; Polish: *wyceniać* and *wartościować* (cf. Helgesson and Muniesa 2013: 5)), (iv) terms without the same root but semantic proximity (assess, appraise, judge, enrich, economise, and their translations in other languages, such as enrichissement as "enrichment" or Bereicherung).

It would be easy to disregard these nuances as a mere inconvenience. Language, it might be thought, is simply an obstacle that, ultimately, does not stand in the way of knowing what we *really mean*. On this view, all variations point to some shared core meaning. But to relegate polysemy to the status of a surface effect begs the question why scholars draw such careful distinctions between different terms. Are, for example, "decisions" still a form of "valuation"? What are the circumstances under which this is (not) the case? If we neglect such questions, we treat value as a container concept and lose sight of important differences among disparate phenomena. Gilbert Ryle referred to this habit, which he found pervasive among philosophers, as a "smothering effect" (Ryle 2015). From the opposite view, a range of different terms could be said to refer to entirely distinct phenomena. Each case study would need to find a precise definition of what is meant by valuation, without that having any impact on the concept of use in other case studies. We are left with a choice between ignoring the variety in meanings of value or defining the term anew each time, potentially fragmenting the field beyond recognition.

The aim of this article is to take the polysemy of value seriously and outline an alternative to smothering and fragmentation. I suggest polysemy is not an inconvenience, but an impactful problem within language. Rather than adding another definition of valuation, I ask what allows us to recognise a social phenomenon as a valuation – both in a given field and a scholarly description of it. There must exist some recognisable ways in which the persistent and ubiquitous problem of the polysemy of value is disarmed, so scholars of valuation can proceed with straightforward notions of value (or valuation,

appraisals, etc.). Eco has described this search for what makes something "intuitively" recognisable as the most important task of semiotic analysis:

> [T]here is something "intuitively" common to the red light of a traffic signal and the verbal order /stop/. One does not need to have a semiotic mind to understand this. The semiotic problem is not so much to recognize that both physical vehicles convey more or less the same command; it begins when one wonders about the cultural or cognitive mechanisms that allow any trained addressee to react to both sign-vehicles in the same way. (…) Now, the basic problem of a semiotic inquiry on different kinds of signs is exactly this one: why does one understand something intuitively? (…) one (if not the most important) of the semiotic endeavors is to explain why something looks intuitive, in order to discover under the felicity of the so-called intuition a complex cognitive process. (Eco 1986: 9).

I take up such a semiotic analysis of valuation in this article, taking my own research area – the ethnography of design practices – as an example. Ethnographies of design are an especially insightful field for this exercise, because valuation as a concept does not sit comfortably within valuation studies. In contrast, the study of markets or other economic phenomena, for example, make us quickly understand where to find valuation. Like the red traffic light in Eco's example, portfolios, auctions or stock tickers are designed to make valuation intuitively relevant for those involved and, indirectly, those outsiders learning about these fields. In design practices, valuation does not play as prominent a role and studies on design often only refer to it in passing. To locate the role of valuation practices for design can, therefore, be difficult. At the same time, there are plenty of debates in design and architectural theory focusing on how to understand the value of design (e.g. Boztepe 2007; Samuel 2018; Bryant et al. 2019; Fisher 2000; Goldberger 2009; Paine et al. 2021). Design is an interesting test case precisely because value has remained even more of a conceptual problem here.

Scholars have developed different understandings in their research of what valuation means. In order to make it intuitively recognisable, as well as plausible and relevant, they use what I call "grammars of valuation". This term follows Wittgensteinian usage and refers to the way terms are part of "language games" in which words and practices create meaning together. "Essence is expressed by grammar" and "(g)rammar tells what kind of object anything is", in Wittgenstein's words (Wittgenstein 1953: §371, §373; cf. Forster 2004). I prefer the Wittgensteinian term "grammar" to more semiotic and structuralist concepts, like cognitive process, *langue*, or structure, because it leaves the relationship between the observer and the observed more open. It implies no confidence in a clear cut between those who use a grammar

and those who observe it, because even to simply observe a language game one must have some basic grasp of what it means to play it. As such all observers of a language game are, by necessity, already "grammatically involved" in it. Less abstractly speaking, this means that these grammatical investigations do not focus on a specific, clearly delineated field (e.g. design practices). The focus is rather on how scholars get themselves grammatically involved in those fields, i.e. how they make it intuitively intelligible that what they write about is value/ valuation. At the same time, investigating their grammars assumes (charitably) that their observations result from language games in the field. These grammars do not belong exclusively to the field, nor to their observers. They are shared and often contradictory ways of dealing with the linguistic and conceptual problem of "not knowing my way around" the polysemy of value (cf. Wittgenstein 1953, para. 123).

These grammatical investigations aim to challenge a pragmatist orientation towards the performativity of value. Put bluntly, the three different grammars I will distinguish here all present value as real thanks to social practices. As a result, they often foreground one dimension of the polysemy of value, i.e. the difference between the noun and the verb form (Brosch and Sander 2016; Bigger and Robertson 2017). Valuation is presented as something that is done, in practices, performed or enacted (Law and Urry 2004; cf. Gond et al. 2016). What a look at the different grammars of valuation will show is that theories of performativity and social practices (Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki et al. 2005) accomplish much less conceptual clarity than is widely assumed through the conversion of a noun (value) to a verb (to valuate). After distinguishing three grammars of value, the last part of this article will hint at some tentative ways in which scholars could be more attentive to the polysemy of value and take it seriously as a problem within language.

The interactionist grammar of value

Valuations appear in social life in a large range of mundane situations, variously taking the shape of appraisals, evaluations or assessments. No technical terminology, scholarly skill or semiotic mind is required to intuitively recognise valuations in such ordinary expressions. It is easy to find people engaging in practices of valuation of this type. Such situations are ubiquitous and ethnographers are likely to encounter them sooner or later. The following example, taken from my own research in an architecture firm and spanning no more than a few seconds, shows an ordinary expression of this type (see Figure 1):
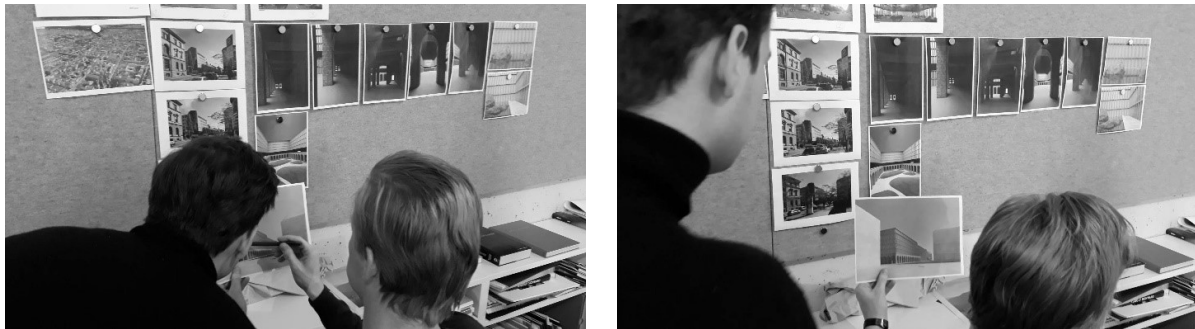
M: I like it this way (.) I like it.
P: hm.
M: *ich find' es gut gerade (.) mir gefällt's.*
P: *hm.*

Figure 1: Evaluation at the magnet wall
Source: Copyright Author

In this short exchange, the "I like it" (German: *mir gefällt's*) allows us to see with an intuitive glance that valuation is in play. Everybody can reasonably be assumed to have seen or gone through comparable situations, i.e. pointing at objects, uttering phrases like "I like it". It is an entirely ordinary expression that forms part of a very short interaction sequence. Even without any ethnographic context, the interaction can be understood as evaluative. Narrowly linguistic observers might be content to collect a range of similar sequences and make inferences about how evaluative interactions are performed. How long are the pauses between evaluation and confirmation ("hm")? How is the evaluative expression coordinated with other modalities of interaction, e.g. gesture, head movement? Other observers, who approach this kind of data with a more ethnographic mindset, are more likely to ask how the interaction is embedded in larger interactive sequences. At what point of the project phase does this interaction occur? What are the roles of the people involved? What are their aims and expectations going into this interaction? How have they changed coming out of it? What kind of occurrence is it? What is this a case of (cf. Goffman 1986)? In this example, the interaction takes place in the middle of a two-month project phase of a group of about five architects working on a competition entry in a large German office. Michael is the project manager, currently reviewing some visual rendering prepared by Phyllis (out of view on the right). They have a meeting in front of a magnet wall in Phyllis's shared office. During my visit, I could regularly participate in similar meetings. Some were more or less formal, different offices were used and the stage of the project advanced, so participants had to adapt

accordingly. Often, they were used to inform and update other project members, or architects higher up in the organisation's hierarchy. Similar materials were used, too. For example, magnet walls were ubiquitous at the office and played an important role mediating these interactions. In other words, there was a whole organisational and socio-material context to these interactions that make them valuations in more than a narrowly linguistic sense.

Having this background knowledge of the pervasiveness and embeddedness of "I like it" situations allows us to guess that what we have captured might be a locally relevant practice of valuation. What I call the "interactionist grammar of value" proceeds from empirical examples such as this one. It asks how a social practice actually works "in practice" (Luck 2012) by looking at the sequential context of the actual expression as a single case or a collection of similar cases (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 120 ff.). Rather than trying to generalise about linguistic features, an ethnographic orientation uses interactions like these to then "look around" and ask how they are embedded, for example, in their organisational context. The interaction, however, remains key for understanding where valuation takes place and where one might learn something about it.

One thing linguistic and ethnographic studies share is an emphasis on how a given practice is part of a larger collection of other ordinary activities. These might include talking (Oak 2011; Adams and Siddiqui 2016), drawing (Mondada 2012), using tools (Büscher et al. 2003; Luff et al. 2009; Lymer et al. 2009), gesticulation (Murphy 2003; Streeck 2008), pointing (Murphy et al. 2012) or seeing (Goodwin 1994; Büscher 2006; Styhre 2011; Luck 2014). Research into interactional grammar questions how something like valuation is constituted through these other activities. In other words, which ordinary activities render a valuation intuitively recognisable and available to those involved? Lymer (2013), for example, in his discussion of the realisation of intention in design reviews, focuses on "assessments" in the context of a series of other ordinary activities (seeing, instructing, question-answer-pairs, etc.). Researchers engaged in interactionist grammar showcase the interactive complexities of a given social practice by situating it alongside a complex set of activities. Valuation, from this point of view, is not a simple action within a "repertoire" of actions. It does not refer to a simple "thing" that actors could "do", as Austin's (1962) *How to Do Things with Words* might suggest. Instead it must be artfully and interactively accomplished (Garfinkel 1967; Enfield and Sidnell 2017).

In this way, the performativity of valuation becomes a truly thorny issue. First, valuation in interactions form part of potentially very large lists of activities to which they relate in complex ways. The resulting lists of social practices look very different from the one that, for example, Muniesa (2014) has put forth in his important book on

performativity in the economy. It makes a difference whether we view valuation or assessment alongside pointing, tool-use, talk, gestures, seeing, or if we locate valuation alongside more abstract, technical terms like economising, abstraction and capitalising (Muniesa 2014: 38–41). These lists of terms are a good way of understanding the grammar around a term, because they indicate what kind of thing they are.

A second point to notice is the way the interactionist grammar of value is used to create knowledge by irritating our intuitive understanding of valuation. Muniesa (2014), among others, has emphasised that even descriptions can be viewed as performative in Austin's sense of performative speech acts, i.e. as something that "enacts the social" (Law and Urry 2004). Valuations, on this account, can be expected to be performative if even descriptions which do not have such linguistic forms are – in practice – performative. The interactionist grammar, however, questions whether even something like an assessment that looks like a performative speech act in form, really is what it purports to be.

To make this point clearer, consider the following example (Figure 2) from the same interaction.
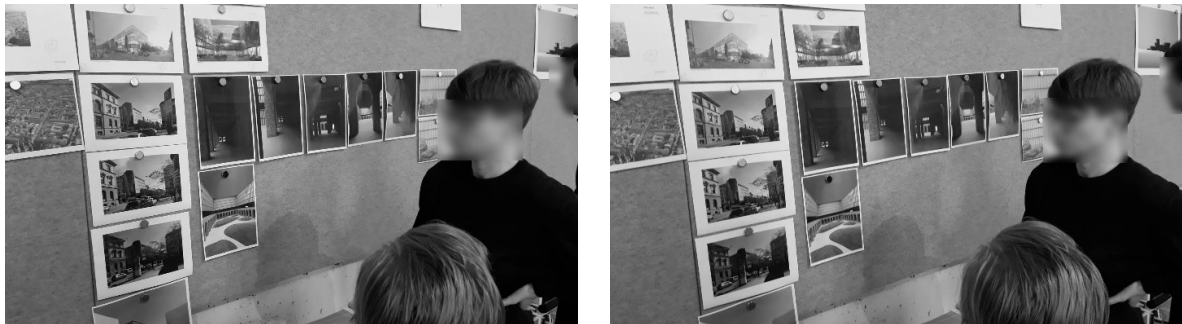
M: you. (.) Phyllis we- we- we we] give- we're sending this out. (0.8) to (.) Thilo [the design director]. (0.3) I ask him, when he (.) can talk. (1.0) and otherwise we're sending this out. °this° as a suggestion. I like it=
P: =>right. well.< so, basically, I believe what would be important is that one here- that Thilo says (.) which of these th[ree:

M: *du. (.) phyllis wi- wi- wir wir] geben- wir schicken das raus. (0.8) an den (.) an den thilo. (0.3) ich frag ihn, wann er (.) erreichbar ist. (1.0) und sonst schicken wir das raus. °das° als vorschlag. ich find es gut.=*
P: *=>genau. also< naja also im prinzip ich glaube, was wich:tig wäre, dass man hier- dass Thilo dann gesagt wird, (.) welches von den d[rei:*

Figure 2: Evaluation to solicit a response
Source: Copyright Author

In this example, we encounter the ordinary expression "I like it" again (German: ich find es gut). The insertion of more interactional context, however, allows for better understanding its role in this situation. The expression appears at the end of Michael's turn, which had started with an interruption of Phyllis (indicated by the square brackets). During the course of his turn M has attempted to close the sequence, seeking some confirmation token from Phyllis at several points. So-called "completion points" of "turn-constructional units" (TCU) (Sacks et al. 1978) can be seen in the numerous occasions that Michael fills his speech with micro-pauses, giving Phyllis the opportunity to chime in. Phyllis is not forthcoming, however, and remains entirely speech- and motion-less. She only picks up again at the point where Michael formulates the evaluative expression. She does not appear to refer directly to the evaluation, but opens up the topic that Michael has sought to close, albeit from a different angle: the matter is transferred to the design director. Within the course of this interaction, Michael's evaluative expression appears to have primarily turn-constructional and specifically sequence-closing functions. Michael's interjection was designed to close down more evaluative talk among those present: which of these images was to be chosen should be a matter for the design director to decide. The evaluative expression itself is primarily another attempt by Michael to elicit a response from Phyllis. Its effects have far more to do with issues of participation within interaction than with the valuation. The point is not that the valuation (and its performative effect) failed. The point is that reading this interaction as a valuation might miscategorise the interactional achievement. We would dislocate where exactly valuation happens in social interaction.

The reverse is also true – and this is where Muniesa's point on descriptions still stands: in any given context, some actions which have not got the linguistic form of a valuation might have performative effects that make it work as such. Conversation analysts suggest, for example, that negative assessments are systematically "dispreferred" in social interaction (Pomerantz 1984). In order to effect an evaluation, interactants tend to avoid outright speech acts of evaluation and instead prefer using alternative practices, such as hedging, reformulating a problem or telling a story. Other participants tend to understand such shifts within conversational practices and their evaluative implications in non-problematic ways. A valuation such as "I like it" might only occur and become visible for the researcher once those other subtler forms of interaction have failed.

Such subtle practices routinely remain "seen but unnoticed" (Garfinkel 1964: 226), which complicates our intuitive grasp of valuation. While finding "I like it"-situations in ethnographic data allows us to enter the interactionist grammar of value, the situation might turn out not to be primarily evaluative after all. On the other

hand, those other ordinary activities like pointing, seeing, gesturing, etc. might on closer inspection turn out to be of central importance for valuation, even if they are not accompanied by an ordinary expression of valuation and their own linguistic form does not allow us to intuitively recognise them as valuation. The language game played through the interactionist grammar challenges our understanding of valuation in this way, sometimes referring to it as an ordinary expression, sometimes as the effect of other ordinary practices. The extent to which those "things with words" are intuitive varies accordingly, but must ultimately be connected back to what is achieved within a given interaction.

The institutionalist grammar of value

Many scholars of valuation would challenge the status of the data presented above. They might grant that it showed a valuation in terms of its linguistic form, but then argue that valuation studies are not really about such ordinary expressions. These scholars are likely arguing from within what I call an "institutionalist grammar of value". For them, the mundane and transitory moments of ordinary expressions are not the site where valuation *really* happens. They will instead focus on formats and processes in which social practices of valuation gain institutional legitimacy. While the institutionalist grammar will still need some linguistic marker to recognise a valuation, the actual instance of the fleeting occurrence of an expression is insignificant compared to its organisational and institutional context. The literature on valuation in general, and ethnographies of design specifically have yielded a range of studies using this institutionalist grammar. They highlight "conventions" (Bessy and Chauvin 2013; Strandvad 2014), "measures" (Brighenti 2018), "standards" (Bidet and Vatin 2013; Bidet 2020), "orders of worth" (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Stark 2009), "forms of enrichment" (Boltanski and Esquerre 2020) or "valuation constellations" (Waibel et al. 2021) – all ways in which formatted social practices stabilise valuations. Actors in any given situation may draw on them as resources for justification, appraisal or objectification.

Studies of design that speak the institutionalist grammar tend to have a focus on specific sites with routinised formats of valuation. For example, Strandvad (2014) finds implicit assumptions and categorisation practices in entry interviews of a design school. Krämer (2014), in his ethnography of an advertising agency, describes evaluation as one among a series of patterned activities, such as aestheticisation, selection, subjectification. Each on their own are recognisable, recurring ways of dealing with specific problems that

have become institutionalised for a specific profession or site. While much of the ethnographic work under the title of "studio studies" (Farías and Wilkie 2015) tends not to be institutionalist strictly speaking, the impetus to identify and discuss one setting – the studio – suggests that it might be regarded as a *de facto* institution for a particular set of concerns. Equally, some studies within the interactionist grammar gain increased legitimacy or relevance by setting their interactions in the context of institutionalised formats, e.g. design reviews or "crit sessions" (Lymer et al. 2009; Oak 2011). What makes researchers speak the institutionalist grammar, however, is their focus on *finding* institutional formats. These are not just the backdrop or starting point for research, they are the point of it. Institutional formats are supposed to enhance and challenge our everyday intuitive understanding of valuation.

From an institutionalist perspective, calling the interaction in Figure 1 a case of "valuation" seems overly formalistic. It misses background information to understand what impact it might have on valuation at this field site. "I like it" is too indexical. It is not clear what either the "it" or the "I" means in the context of the organisation. Crucially, it is also not clear what to "like" something in this architectural firm means. Readers might want to know that the architect at the centre of the image is the project leader, overseeing day-to-day activities. The architect on the right is a specialist in visual renderings at the firm – a career path with both benefits and limitations that separates her from those working in a single project. Final decision-making power lies with the design director, who is absent. S/he is not involved in day-to-day activities but only comes for visitations once or twice a week. The conversation takes place in the context of these multiple audiences each playing different roles that can be drawn on as a resource. Even some short exchanges can hint at this organisational context, as Figure 3 shows.

M: (…) there are, of course, buildings that are somehow green like that, (.) right? we wanted to insert a plant there, (.) which (0.7) at the moment we are trying to proceed very strictly geometrically (.) inserting it there and very (0.7) explicitly to the [front-

C: I would] with with with the plants n:ot (.) rely on them=neither (1.0) so this (.) you could do this but (.) this this is going to be the first thing the client crosses out=it is dependent (.) on the archi[tecture.

W: they are] just explicitly asking for that.

C: >yes, yes, but< when architecture depends on a plant, then there is a problem. (.) I would definitely keep the plants in mind, that is definitely (1.0) I find it pretty as well. […] Something like this I also find that great. […] But the architecture=the idea cannot depend on it. So the plant – one has: to .hhh somehow like this ((C gestures above the model)).

I: supporting [but yes.

C: but plan does] not simply solve (0.7) the concept.

M: hm (0.5) yes.

C: or is not concept.

M: (…) es gibt natürlich so gebäude, die irgendwie so grün sind, (.) ne? wir haben da wollten da so 'ne pflanze einsetzen, (.) die (0.7) wir versuchen jetzt im moment so sehr streng geometrisch (.) irgendwie einzusetzen und so ganz (0.7) explizit nur na[ch vorne-

C: ich würde mich] bei bei bei pflanzen n:icht (.) verlassen=auch nicht (1.0) also dis (.) kann man machen aber (.) dis dis wird das erste was bauherren wegstreichen=(dis 'is) abhängig (.) von der archi[tektur.

W: die fragen] halt explizit danach.

C: >ja, ja schon, aber< wenn architektur abhängig ist von 'ner pflanze, dann is 'n problem. (.) Ich würde auf jeden fall Pflanzen mitdenken, das is' auf jeden fal]l (1.0) find ich auch hübsch. […] Auch sowas find ich- auch toll. […] aber die architektur=die idee darf davon nicht abhängig sein. Also die pflanze- da muss: man nochmal (Geste) .hhh: irgendwie so (Geste).

I: unterstützend [sein aber ja.

C: aber pflanze löst] nich' (0.7) einfach das konzept.

M: hm (0.5.) ja.

C: oder ist nicht konzept.

Figure 3: Participants discuss the value of plants in architecture
Source: Copyright Author

Diverse interactive practices like gestural referencing, drawings, question-and-answer exchanges or storytelling all become part of institutionalised valuations within this grammar. What makes the data a case of valuation is not the evaluative character of their interactions as such. The complex ways these ordinary practices are joined together is not what is most interesting, but institutionalised formats (roles, procedures, networks, etc.) which go beyond ordinary, fleeting expressions.

The fact that institutionalised valuations look like an intuitive case of valuation is no coincidence. Whether a crit session at university, a design review within an architectural office or a jury discussing design

proposals, all these formats are created to undo the ambiguities over valuation we face in everyday life. Indirect communication, politeness rules, gossip stories have their place in the moral tapestry of everyday interaction and the informal side of organisations, but institutional procedures are put in place to render these "explicit" (Muniesa 2014: 24–26). Institutions are set up to make values and valuations visible to everybody who wants to see, because that is the way they can become consequential. To use Sharrock's expression (1995: 4), valuations in institutional contexts "are easy to find because they are put there to be found".

As a result, when the institutionalist grammar directs attention to broader contexts of conventions, orders of worth, forms of enrichment, etc., ethnographic research offers first-hand knowledge of which contexts are relevant in any given case. It may also inform us on how they are used in any given "trial of strength" (Boltanski 2011), potentially finding implicit rules or informal practices which are themselves partially institutionalised. In the architecture firm I observed, for example, that project groups could be seen to make sense of the explicit evaluations of the design director after he left. They recontextualise his input and try to figure out how to take it on without giving up their own vision. They might be working towards fulfilling demands until the next visitation but much of the import of his evaluation still has to be determined by the group and put into action in their own "re-evaluation". Besides challenging our understanding of valuation through historical and structural analysis (values and valuations change according to time and place), the institutionalist grammar may also aim to challenge an intuitive understanding of explicit formats of valuation by discovering their implicit rules and practices.

The associationist grammar of value

A third grammar with which to make sense of the polysemy of value can be found in the "sociology of translation" (Callon 1984; Law 2004; Latour 2005). This grammar incorporates the ambiguity of value as it rediscovers it in the field in the shape of what Stark (2009) calls a "sense of dissonance". Stark's work is mostly grammatically institutionalist, interested in the "orders of worth" (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) that actors draw on to lend weight to their decisions. Others, however, have emphasised dissonance under labels such as "epistemic dissonance" (Farías 2015), "indeterminacy" (Hutter and Farías 2017) or "constitutive ambiguity" (Hennion 2015: 52).

Dissonance comes with the necessity for translation as the way agency is distributed through relations of human and non-human actors or "actants". Value, in this tradition, is the result of the position of an actant within a set of relations, while remaining irreducible to

any form of social institutionalisation. What makes translation significant is less a search for its "felicity conditions" (Austin 1962). Translation becomes significant for understanding the problem of value in the way it connects to "treason" (Serres 1982), "untranslatability" (Cassin et al. 2014) and "friction" (Tsing 2005). Hutter (2015) even draws the two concepts together and speaks of "dissonant translation".

One important figure within the "associationist grammar of value" is Antoine Hennion, who has contributed to the development of valuation studies at crucial points (Hennion 2015, 2017). While rarely discussing design practices heads-on (but see Dubuisson and Hennion (1996)), his work has contributed to recurring themes surrounding design, such as taste (Hennion 2001, 2004), amateurism (Gomart and Hennion 1999; Teil and Hennion 2004) and cultural intermediaries (Hennion 1989, 2003). The notion of "attachments" stands at the centre of his research: "The word is a breaker of dualism", he claims (Hennion 2017: 74). Through attachment, as well as the relations that mediate it, Hennion repudiates the centrality of action even in its more distributed and interactionist forms (Gomart and Hennion 1999). What is "performed" is, then, not as much an action within an interaction, or within an institutional format. What is performatively created – throughout mediations between actants – are "attachments". The kind of social phenomenon Hennion imagines here is illustrated in his description of the surprise experienced at a wine tasting:

> First, there is prise (meaning "grasp" or "hold" in French), in the dual, active and passive sense of the word (...): the hold of the object, refined in the act of grasping, but also, on the amateur's side, the act of holding and allowing oneself to be held, each calling for, and not conflicting with, the other. Then, there is sur (in French, the prefix "over"): because the object adds something – that's all its charm! – as much on the side of tastes, savors and effects than on the side of bodies, sensations, what is felt. The object of attachment holds and it sur-prises, that is, it over-holds us more than we can ever expect. (Hennion 2015: 50).

A second author who has taken up the notion of "attachment" and authored a series of studies on architectural design is Albena Yaneva (e.g. 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2013, 2017). For one of these, she follows the same type of attachment – i.e. surprise – in the context of conservation efforts of the *Alte Aula* in Vienna (Yaneva 2008). Surprise, she argues, is crucial in answering questions like: "Can old buildings faithfully transmit social meaning and historical value? How do they let themselves be known and transformed?" Surprise occurs in the moments when "the building itself" acts as a "performative agent" that is "recalcitrant" and "undisciplined" in face of the architects and conservators attempts to tame it. Surprise "provokes" (Muniesa 2014)

and refers beyond itself: "the interaction of a building with architects, clients, and conservators becomes an event that trans-acts the particular situation of 'surprise'" (Yaneva 2008: 22).

In another work, Yaneva focuses on scoping techniques at Rem Kollhaas's Office of Metropolitan Architecture (Yaneva 2005). She shows how designers continuously switch between smaller and larger models using special equipment. While she does describe these as "trials" (similar to Boltanski and Thévenot [2006]), their purpose is not specifically to stabilise meaning. This makes them different from "inscription devices" that turn matter into conventionalised sign representations in a process Iedema (2001) calls "resemiotization". While Yaneva preserves the sense that there are shifts between different semiotic medias, she does not claim that this yields legitimacy in the way those speaking the institutionalist grammar would like to see:

> [T]e small- and large-scale models (…) constitute a circuit: when the small model is no longer needed (…), it is scaled up and transformed into a large one; when the large model accomplishes its function, it is necessary to return to the small one. (…) [T]he building is rendered diffuse, nearly atmospheric, and mundane; it is lost in transit. (Yaneva 2005: 885–886).

What both of these authors try to achieve through the "associationist grammar of value" is to show the significance – and "value" – of objects in social life. Hennion openly says as much: "properly taking objects into account: to me, this is the hidden stake lying behind the 'value issue'" (Hennion 2017: 72). Yaneva has in various ways tried to showcase the role of objects, not only in how they "surprise", but also how they "make the social hold" (Yaneva 2009b), in politics (Yaneva 2017) or the "crafting" of history (Yaneva 2020).

The language used in these efforts is often itself ambiguous. Yaneva, for example, insists objects did not "literally talked to us" (Yaneva 2008: 24). What is at stake in the word "literally" here? What is at stake with the quotation marks when she says "Materials, scoping instruments and new knowledge 'talk back' to the architects" (Yaneva 2005: 871)? Hennion similarly struggles to find a linguistic solution to this gap between the ordinary use of a verb and the way it is intended within the "associationist grammar":

> Semiotics makes it possible to describe the emergence of an effect by referring not to agents but to 'that which lets/makes happen' (ce qui fait faire, Greimas and Courtès 1986). For semioticians, this 'that which' is the predicate of the sentence; for us, it is the mediating object, the dispositive. (Gomart and Hennion 1999: 226).

(T)he amateur "has himself love" things (…). This awkwardly attempted to find an expression of such a grammar of taste: so, in the thread of faire faire, we used therefore se faire aimer, or se mettre à aimer ("to have oneself love something", and reciprocally "to assist things to express themselves"). In fact, we had to resort to many other laboured turns of phrase, like "to put oneself in a condition to be actively affected by", or "to let oneself go into the grip of the object while continuing to value (in the lovely double sense of the word) it". How could we signify such a paradox: the fine articulation of attentiveness and fastidious control (in things, even when these go unrestrained) with abandon and zeal (which is itself immediately re-restrained by evaluation, narratives of experience and appropriation into stories)? (Hennion 2017: 117).

These "laboured turns of phrase" are the result a refusal to be led by either ordinary expressions within interactions, or the explicit formats of institutions. The "associationist grammar" pursues an alternative route that makes value "intuitively" accessible. This alternative focuses on the "experientiality" of moments, sites or figures (Caracciolo 2014; cf. Hennion 2019). One expression of this trend is its recurrent effort to appeal to the experimental (cf. Bogusz 2018), as well as to continue the traditional laboratory studies at the design studio (Yaneva 2005, 2009a, 2013; Houdart 2008; Houdart and Minato 2009; Farías and Wilkie 2015; Potthast 2017). Both places, i.e. the lab and the studio, share an intense entanglement of human and non-human entities in an enclosed setting, as well as a focus on crafted and skilful sensory experience. They offer a vantage point from which to describe how a heterogenous setting creates the kind of "attachments" that make certain ideas, things or practices valuable.

How does the excerpt from my own field data fare within "associationist grammar"? First, we could draw attention to how the magnet wall is set up within the larger material–semiotic context of the office. The question, then, is not whether the "I like it" is an evaluation or not. The question is also not, whether that expression takes place within an evaluative format and draws on resources to make it a powerful speech act. Instead, the crucial issue is how it takes part in forming attachments between a range of human and non-human actors. We can expect that "it" can only be an entrance point into these relations. What we would need are more materials and instances of attachments to make sense of "it". The magnet walls are part of a larger "ecology of practice" (Latour 2007; Yaneva 2017) made up of a plethora of objects, such as pencils, blueprints, visual renderings, large printers, a small library of design and architecture books and magazines, an archive downstairs, models at various stages of precision, meeting room furniture, desktop computers, design software and many more (see Figure 4). Architects move through their studio switching between their private desktop space to shared areas, where

in turn they regularly move from one medium to another by turning their attention from models to the magnet wall to computers and back. Architects create a material environment surrounding them to constantly probe and reconfigure. It is only in the context of the relational entanglements of the site itself that an expression such as "I like it" can index something of value.
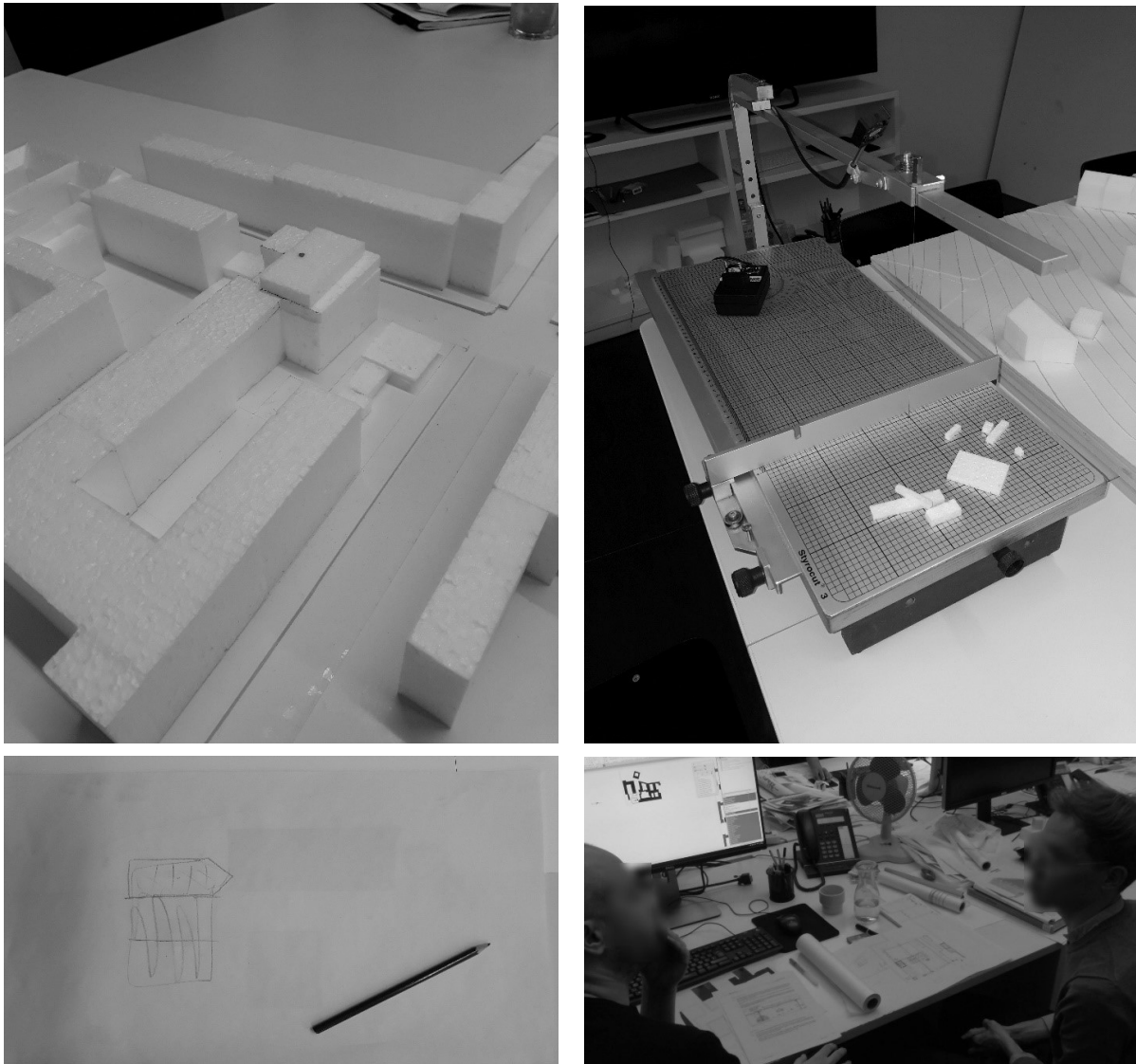

Figure 4: The abundance of objects at the architecture studio
Source: Copyright Author

This movement also entails a shift between different actions, like sketching, pointing, cutting, tracing, glancing, observing, discussing, storytelling. Adding "evaluating" as a plain and ordinary activity would not give "the value issue" much significance. For it to be a constitutive feature of design work, the associationist grammar retains

the ambiguity inherent in the term. In this way, polysemy stops being a linguistic inconvenience and instead becomes an asset, because it is a feature of the field itself, as Hennion makes clear in a short passage that is reminiscent of the field data used in this article:

> Valuation is (…) a moment when a contact or an experience of things makes both the characters of the thing appreciated and a sensitiveness to those differentiated characters appear: "it's good/I like it," in the case of taste, a case in which those two aspects are the closest. The "tasting/testing" oscillation is not a simple play on words to express our debates, it is central. (Hennion 2015: 53).

Hennion moves the polysemy of value into the field, where it reappears as an oscillation between "tasting" and "testing", the studio and the lab, the "to let happen" and "to make happen" (*faire faire*). Rather than clearly stipulating that objects "have agency" or "are valuable", the associationist grammar uses linguistic ambiguities, metaphors and conflations to narrate how moments, sites or figures come to matter, or have value. The flipside of this approach is that it must recreate what it is like to experience these moments of attachment (e.g. surprise), or sites that produce them (e.g. the studio), or social figures occupied with creating attachments. The figure of the amateur is an example in Hennion's work:

> The amateur is the *lover*, not the layperson (…) they are experimenters, *éprouveurs*, or even, why not, "valuers" (…)? (…) No one feels more than do amateurs the open, indeterminate (and hence disputable, *contestable*) character of their object of passion. (…) Amateurism is the worship of what makes a difference. (…) That is why I treat amateurs as teachers of pragmatism. (Hennion 2017: 75).

While Hennion's discussion of amateurs looks odd from the standpoint of social theory, he describes something that is very intuitive from within design practices. Designers themselves, for example often foreground the role of objects in the studio (e.g. Styhre 2011) and design researchers have embraced the focus on objects for understanding creative practice (ATELIER (Project) 2011). While Hennion presents his "laboured phrases" as technical inventions, Yaneva openly admits that her speaking of objects as "talking back" or "surprising" are not her own, but drawn from the field. Guggenheim (2020) has consequently questioned if these types of descriptions are not in fact too "intuitive", i.e. too close to the field's own language. In preserving the polysemy of value as a problem for the field site, the "associationist grammar" runs the risk of giving up its critical capacity towards design practices. Its experiential narrative of sites, moments

and figures of attachment potentially continues the field's valuation efforts, elevating them to "teachers of pragmatism".

The three grammars of value beyond smothering and fragmentation

The three grammars identified here cover most of the ways scholars deal with the polysemy of value. Table 1 summarises the main points raised above, two of which are worth revisiting again. First, in abstract formulations of valuation, it has been commonplace to reformulate problems of "value" into its verb form (e.g. Brosch and Sander 2016; Bigger and Robertson 2017). This dominance of the term "valuation" does not, however, bear out in scholarly practice. Researchers focus on practices, activities and verbs differently depending on the grammar of value from within which they work. Among these, the phenomena of interest for the interactionist grammar stay closest to the verb form, giving it a prominent place as intuitively intelligible, ordinary activities: "Evaluations", "judgements" or "assessment" as nominalisations of verbs reflect actual instances of ordinary expressions. In the institutionalist grammar, on the other hand, valuation appears within explicit formats through which it is transformed into nouns, such as "conventions", "standards", "rankings", "rules", "forms of enrichment" or simply "values". Finally, for the associationist grammar, the polysemy of value is resolved neither through its verb form, nor through its noun form. That is because neither verb, nor noun, but metaphorical or *double entendre* uses of phrase linguistically express a heterogeneity of elements.

Grammar of value	Interactionist grammar	Institutionalist grammar	Associationist grammar
Where to find valuation?	Ordinary expressions	Evaluative formats	Moments, sites and/ or figures
What makes valuation intuitively recognisable?	Linguistic form	Institutional explicitness	Experientiality
What form does the polysemy of value take (examples)?	Diversity of practices (evaluations, assessments, storytelling)	Plurality of values (orders of worth, conventions, standards)	Heterogeneity of elements (resemiotisation, actor-networks, topologies)

Adjacent field (and its alternative concept to valuation)	Sociolinguistics (assessments)	Organisation studies (decisions)	Science and technology studies/ cultural anthropology (translation)
How can studies challenge the intuitive understanding of valuation?	Not all valuations (in form) are valuations (in effect). Some non-valuations (in form) are valuations (in effect).	Values – as operating through institutions – undergo historical change and can be subject to further implicit rules (of valuation).	Valuation is not about actions at all. They are instances that show how things come to "matter".

Table 1: Grammars of value in comparison
Source: Author's work

The preference for the verb form ("to valuate") is still prevalent in conceptual and methodological discussions, i.e. before any grammar is employed to render a field intelligible through description. This is primarily a nod to a set of theoretical and ontological assumptions, namely pragmatism, performativity theory and social practice theory. It also reflects warnings against nominalisations (e.g. Billig 2013) and the widespread tendency to preface non-verbs with a generic verb form ("doing gender" (West and Fenstermaker 1995), "doing being ordinary" (Sacks 1992), "doing attentiveness" (Silverman 1998), "doing being plurilingual" (Mondada 2004)). This theoretical preference for the verb form, however, comes with its own blind spots. It makes us miss the different grammatical practices for observing social phenomena.

A second point to highlight from Table 1 is which aspects of valuation each grammar tends to problematise. Just as they all make valuation intuitively accessible in specific ways, they also all challenge our understanding of value in distinct ways. These are the two sides of the same coin on which instructive analysis depends, especially in ethnographic descriptions. Each grammar yields a distinct type of a "hidden" or "silent" (Hirschauer 2001) dimension of valuation. The interactionist grammar with its focus on the sequential and contextual occurrence of ordinary expressions leads us to ask what can be counted as an evaluation, assessment, etc. What kind of actions are performed in valuation? What kind of activities together perform valuation? In the institutionalist grammar, values and valuation are explicit formats, but these underlie both historical transformation and implicit rules. How do values and practices of valuation emerge historically? What implicit norms, rules and practices sustain valuation

in a given institution? Last, the associationist grammar's rejection of valuation actions and value nouns means the "value issue" remains always partially inaccessible in heterogenous networks, and in the ambiguity that lies between "testing" and "tasting". How can we recreate a sense of what is involved in being with those sites, moments and figures?

Taken together these grammatical investigations outline which directions valuations studies should pursue, and which it might want to avoid. The same vocabulary of value, (e)valuations, etc. is used across the different grammars, while the polysemy of these terms constantly invites category mistakes where one grammar of value is applied across all social phenomena. But each grammar is only intuitively "at home" within a circumscribed area of social phenomena which it allows to describe, interrogate and potentially challenge. Once these grammars are overstretched, they lose their descriptive and critical potential. In the worst case, they come to "smother" the practices they are employed to describe (Ryle 2015). Alternatively, we might acknowledge the different grammars and the polysemy of value, but accept exactly one grammar and one meaning of "valuation" for any given study and subscribe to the language game that comes with it. We will then still end up with a growing number of case studies and field observations that in their multiplicity only yield a fragmented concept of valuation studies. While smothering blocks off any road to a reformulation of valuation studies, fragmentation does not even attempt it.

The challenge of valuation studies moving forward must be reformulated accordingly: How to study value, valuations, etc. while fully recognising the polysemy of these terms? If this recognition of polysemy is confined to matters of definition, dealt with in the first pages or paragraphs of a study, smothering or fragmentation will necessarily follow. Instead, scholars of valuation studies should embrace the polysemy and explore how participants in their field struggle with it, too. This would mean drawing together the interactive, institutional and associationist issues at the heart of value as "language and the actions into which it is woven" (Wittgenstein 1953, para. 7).

Some references for moving forward

There have been studies that, forced by the ubiquity of problems associated with the polysemy of value, have come to deal with it in productive ways. They manage to come to some recognition of the polysemy of value as a problem within both the activities of the field and their own descriptive language. These studies should serve as first reference points for a reformulation of valuation studies.

Navarro-Aguiar (2017) has put forth a first good example in his account of product designers at the Volvo Group, in which he makes a connection between valuation and strategy-practices. While much of his case study is framed as associationist, the focus on strategy ultimately leads in a different direction. Navarro-Aguiar tells the story of how product designers set up a meeting with upper management in which they hoped to persuade them to give design a more significant position within the organisation. This was supposed to be an "obligatory passage point" (Callon 1984), a "theatre of proof" (Latour 1988) or an opportunity for "tasting/testing" the value of design (Hennion 2015). A brief was specifically prepared and circulated for that purpose, which they hoped would enrol new stakeholders. For several reasons, some of which are circumstantial, this attempt failed and provoked more resistance from other departments. As a result, product designers had to shift gears and engage in a series of smaller adjustments and services targeted at middle management.

Two approaches were crucial in this alternative strategy. First, designers developed a scoring device to make design features comprehensible to engineers. This resonates with the literature on quantification and measurement in valuation studies (Espeland and Lom 2015) and resembles a practical orientation of participants towards the institutionalist grammar of value, moving from one institutional frame (formal meetings) to another (numerical "valuation devices"). Second, they engaged in a range of "soft contacts" with potential allies, delivering on specific projects and inviting their allies to their design studio. In that way, "rhetorical persuasion was achieved through participation, not through words or numbers" (Navarro-Aguiar 2017: 246). While Navarro-Aguiar does not go into as much detail as a genuinely interactionist grammar would demand, he clearly hints at instances in which some types of activity (collaborating on projects, informal conversations, etc.) are turned into instances of valuation. It could be insightful to look even more closely at how these interactions are turned into valuations (not in form, but in effect), especially given that participants explicitly try to keep these activities out of the institutional contexts that are usually on the radar of an institutionalist grammar of value.

The important points are not so much in the details of the story, but the heterogenous strategy underlying the designers' valuation efforts. Following recent scholarship in strategy-as-practice (Kornberger 2017), Navarro-Aguiar emphasises how designers could not follow one path, but had to adjust to occasioned circumstances and engage in several activities and sites simultaneously. Strategy, in this understanding, is not centrally planned but a result of partial adjustments to achieve "effective persuasion and dissuasion" (Navarro-Aguiar 2017: 74). Some moments turned out to be privileged in hindsight, but even then, the way designers managed to valorise

their work had no special venues and only rare moments in which recognisable "valuation" took place. On the contrary, instances like their big meeting with upper management, which to outsiders intuitively looks like a moment of valuation, proved to be ineffective. Such an outright practice of valuation had to be suspended in favour of more covert activities. Navarro-Aguiar equally explains that practices of quantification were "a matter of manoeuvring around an organisational realpolitik" (Navarro-Aguiar 2017: 198) and "depended less on 'actors" belief in its objectivity" (Navarro-Aguiar 2017: 199). The scoring device constituted an intuitively recognisable practice of valuation, whose more strategic effect, however, was to gather different communities of practice in specific frontstage moments, while allowing the designers to continue their work on the backstage (Goffman 1959). If research in valuation was to focus only on the practices that intuitively and recognisably appear as valuations, it is going to miss the strategic importance of these other activities.

A second point of reference can be found in a study by Lury and Marres (2015), in which they develop the concept of "objectual practice" (Knorr-Cetina 1997) with a view to better understanding valuation in digital environments. They defend a Deweyan understanding which "locates valuation (…) beyond or before the realm of practical action. Valuation is not only something that is 'done'; it is something that happens, or is happening" (Lury and Marres 2015: 237). Making action the secondary phenomenon does not sit well with any notion of "doing valuation". Lury and Marres's account resembles the associationist grammar, in that they emphasise the importance of "environmental occasions" (Lury and Marres 2015: 237). They do not, however, show an interest for any ontological commitments or a search to locate the source of value. Just as in the strategy-in-practice perspective of Navarro-Aguiar, they emphasise that value emerges not necessarily where valuation is visible, made explicit and intuitively intelligible. Instead, there is discontinuity between the environment that makes things valuable and the actions of valuation.

Lury and Marres also claim that:

> One of the most significant characteristics of contemporary objectual valuation is social-ability, where the production of sociality is an -ability, a capacity that is rendered technically possible in processes of problematization and selection. This is not merely to say that objectual valuation produces or creates the social, but that the accomplishment of objectual valuation is to render sociality a structural possibility, a latent and never finished potential for processes of valuation. (Lury and Marres 2015: 250).

I take this to mean that what has traditionally been seen as the domain of sociology – "the social", social practices and institutions

(Knorr-Cetina 1997) – should be reconceived as a matter of abilities. The abilities of valuation direct the attention away from the "practices of valuation" towards what "render(s) sociality a structural possibility, a latent and never finished potential for processes of valuation".[1]

Maybe then, if we were to follow the cues provided by Navarro-Aguiar, and Lury and Marres, the reformulation of valuation studies entails moving past the rhetorical trope that favours valuation (the verb) over value (the noun). The problem of valuation/value is, then, only partially expressed through the three grammatical forms described here. As observers, we are able to see and describe this problem at work in the interactions of participants, in the formats of institutions, and in the experiences within heterogeneous material–semiotic networks. Each of these grammars displays distinct types of valuation practices and the work of students of valuations depends on these practices being intuitively intelligible. There should be nothing mysterious or hidden about somebody saying "I like it" in an interaction, or within the institutional format of a design meeting, or as a matter of experiencing the shifting shapes and materials in front of him/her. What Navarro-Aguiar's study demonstrates is that there is still something mysterious remaining about the problem of valuation/value, something that slips away from those practices of valuation and requires both the participants he observed and valuation scholars as a whole to move from one grammar of valuation to another. What he observes as the necessity for strategy is, I would contend, a result of the polysemy of value.

Conclusion

The polysemy of value is a problem that will stay with us. There is little point in denying the way terms work in ordinary as well as scholarly contexts. How seriously we take this problem and how we let it affect research is not a trivial matter. The suggestion presented

[1] Lury and Marres's suggestion to reformulate the problems of sociology in terms of "social-ability" tentatively suggests a new look at valuation/value. As an "-ability", it is possible to speak not primarily in terms of nouns or verbs, but adjectives: something is valuable, as in "with value", or value-able, i.e. in a position to be valued, or value-able as in "they are able to value". In a more recent book on "problem spaces", Lury plays with similar linguistic constructions of "knowledge-ability", "answer-ability" and "response-ability" (Lury 2020). Maybe rather than being stuck with fragmented or smothering understandings of value/valuation, there is something productive in adopting such neologisms. In this vein, "value-ability" would neither be an ordinary expression, that refers to a concrete, intuitively grasped scene of value/valuation, nor an abstract umbrella term. Whether or not we pursue such paths in our linguistic reformulation of valuation studies is ultimately less important, however, than the overall goal of finding descriptive avenues that recognise the polysemy of value as a real issue at the heart of valuation studies rather than as a mere inconvenience.

here was to see the polysemy of value as an issue at the heart of a potential reformulation of valuation studies. The problem with values is then also a problem within language.

Polysemy is not an inconvenience in this view, but a marker of a real issue. A ritualistic acknowledgement that value is a notoriously difficult term is not enough, if valuation scholars then proceed as if it had no consequences. Linguistic ambiguity runs the risk of becoming a pretext to use value as a container concept and include a range of issues that might just as well run under different banners like economic sociology, sociology of science, design research. For valuation studies to be reformulated as a domain of research it should have some clarity over a set of its problems and questions, and not come down to "the social construction of 'x'", in which "x" = "value", which is in turn defined anew in each new case study. Polysemy will, otherwise, unrecognisably fragmentise valuation studies as a whole.

The answer suggested here for the polysemy of value is not to agree on a shared definition of value. Such an attempt likely leads to the smothering of differences that we are easily able to attend to in ordinary language use (Ryle 2015). The grammatical investigations in this article are not only a countermeasure to fragmentation, but also to a general "sociology of value" (Heinich 2017, 2020). The interactionist, institutionalist and associationist grammars of value are different ways to address value through which scholars can address the problem of value in social life. In each of them value/valuation is rendered intuitively intelligible for both participants and observers. While the terms value or valuation may be used in all of them, the ways they operate are grammatically different. As a result, value/ valuation appears as part of ordinary interactions, as much as they are part of explicit institutional formats, as well as the experience of acting in and through material–semiotic associations. Value is too rich and multifaceted to be reduced to one of these grammars and their corresponding social practices. We know this intuitively in ordinary language use, we should not forget in theorising. Acknowledging the polysemy of value, therefore, should be at the centre of any reformulation of valuation studies.

Acknowledgments

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