Articulations and associations: Comments on Stojnić and Lepore's Inflammatory Language

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I critically examine Stojnić and Lepore's key claim from their book In-flammatory Language that articulations are particularly important to the analysis of slurs. I agree with Stojnić and Lepore that we should endorse the significance of articulations for our linguistic intuitions, es-pecially when it comes to the causal and social powers of language; I argue that for locating this approach to the articulations of slurs in a broader context of fiction and taboos. However, while I accept Stojnić and Lepore's evidence for theorizing some slurs through associations at the level of articulations, I argue for continuing to account for slurs in part through prohibitions and through associations at the level of words and concepts.

Keywords: Slurs; associations; norms; words; concepts.

1. Introduction

In recent years, philosophers of language have begun to discuss slurs intensively. In part because people have such strong intuitions about slurs, slurs help us address new questions about the nature of meaning in language, the role of language in culture, the politics of language and interaction, and the psychology of language processing. Una Stojnić and Ernie Lepore's book *Inflammatory Language* (2025) continues this trend with several exciting and provocative suggestions. As I explain in this paper, their work brings an important new set of issues to the

table, encompassing a wide range of novel arguments and considerations, informed by important and previously unexplored categories of data. The excitement of these contributions lies in part in the ability of philosophers to engage with them critically. I think it's a testament to the success of their book that the counterarguments and clarifications that I'll be presenting in this paper could only have been formulated against the distinctions and claims that they put forward in the book.

A variety of proposals aim to characterize what makes slurs offensive. An important direction has been to link the offensive character of slurs to the meaning that's conventionally and arbitrarily associated with them. Generally, the offensive content is taken to be some kind of claim that disparages or demeans a target group. Theories differ about how that disparaging content is associated with the slur.

One idea is that it is part of the propositional content normally conveyed by the slur, what linguists tend to call its at-issue content. This is a proposal that's most associated with Christopher Hom (2008). Another idea is that the disparaging content is a background assumption that the speaker takes to be uncontroversially shared with the hearer: in other words, that it is a presupposition. This proposal is often associated with Philippe Schlenker (2007). A different way of associating meanings with slur terms is to assume that the content is not assumed to be shared with the hearer, but is also not assumed to be put forward, as part of the main claim being advanced by the speaker. Many terms have such arbitrary incidental contributions to meaning; they generally are known as conventional implicatures, following Christopher Potts (2005). Timothy Williamson (2009) highlights the ability of this conventional implicature analysis to capture the disparaging content of slurs.

Yet another approach aims to assimilate the content of slurs, not to an explicit disparaging meaning, but rather to an implicit attitude or inference that the speaker and perhaps the audience are expected to take regarding the use of the slur. One example of this kind of approach is to account for slurs in terms of expressive meaning (Potts 2007)—a contribution that indicates that the speaker and perhaps the audience should take a negative attitude towards the target group without thereby making a specific claim about the properties of the group that merit this negative attitude. A different approach is taken by Elisabeth Camp (2013), who accounts for slurs in terms of disparaging perspectives—that is, patterns of inference and prominence that emphasize negative stereotypes about the target group without thereby encoding a particular propositional contribution. Her analogy is the perspective from Wittgenstein's Duck–Rabbit, of seeing the lines as either forming duck or forming a rabbit.

As you can see, there's an incredible variety of directions that can be used to conceptualize a disparaging meaning as encoded into the slur itself. At the same time, many researchers take a very different kind of

approach, and this is the approach that Ernie Lepore has developed in a range of different work over the last decade and more (Anderson and Lepore 2013a, Anderson and Lepore 2013b, Lepore and Stone 2018). For Lepore, the idea of accounting for the meaning the offensive character of slurs in terms of meaning is misguided. There is no unique signature of offensive meaning in slurs that differentiates slurs from neutral counterparts. Instead, as Lepore and Stone (2018) put it, slurs differ from their neutral counterparts in heterogeneous, open-ended and often non propositional ways, including words whose loaded associations evoke and perpetuate offensive imagery. The important point for Lepore and Stone is that these loaded associations aren't conventionally associated with words but instead arise organically from the words' history and the interpretive practices of audiences that look in expansive and open-ended ways in understanding what's said.

In the face of this heterogeneity, Anderson and Lepore (2013a, 2013b) claim that ultimately, the only thing that slurs share is that it's prohibited to use them. This prohibitionist approach offers a very different kind of explanation for the offensive character of slurs, one that doesn't point at meaning and the direct relationship of speaker and audience that meaning helps to mediate, but instead points more broadly at the social and cultural context for language use, in which the regimentation of language takes on political objectives and gives political meanings over and above the conventional meanings for the social significance of the use of a word with a particular political status.

This is the context in which Stojnić and Lepore's work unfolds. Following Lepore's previous suggestions, Stojnić and Lepore reject semantic views. They also criticize and reject prohibitionism as giving an inadequate story about the interpretation of slurs. And to tie these arguments together, they characterize the associations of slurs in a new way, one that they argue directly can account both for when we find slurs and related items offensive and what offense those slurs seem to carry. It is in this positive proposal—and specifically in the idea that articulations are particularly important to the analysis of slurs—that a range of new data and new arguments come into play.

Articulations are systematic ways of realizing linguistic terms, and they were first brought to attention by Hawthorne and Lepore (2011) in their work on the metaphysics of words. As Hawthorne and Lepore observe, "[o]ne and the same word can be written on a pad with a pen, typed on a sheet of paper, projected on a screen, spoken out loud, signed with a gesture, or Brailled on a plaque" (2011: 13). Articulations are these distinctive ways of presenting the word through a particular medium; the word is the underlying abstraction that's realized across all the different articulations. This metaphysics is not just a philosophical curiosity. It plays an important role in helping to get clear on what's behind ordinary language users' talk about linguistic forms. For example, it's intuitive to say that 'color' and 'colour' are two spellings of the same

word. You can make sense of this claim by thinking of the spellings in quotes as exhibiting articulations, which can, in fact, be different articulations of the same abstract word.

What Stojnić and Lepore argue is that what is problematic about slurs is their articulations. It's in the articulations, not in the words, that we should look for offensiveness. To bring home this point, they offer a telling example from Chinese (reported by Matisoff 1986) where the writing system offers two different characters to represent a particular word, the name "Yao." The two characters differ in the radicals that make them up. One, 傜, features the person radical, suggesting that the character denotes a person. That's the unoffensive articulation. Historically, there's also been a character 猺 that combines the same phonological cue for the name "Yao" with a radical for beast.

Obviously, it can be upsetting to be denoted by a character that implicitly identifies the semantic category that one belongs to as an animal. But of course, it's not the name, not the word, that's offensive, only the articulation with the character 猺. There's nothing offensive at all about the alternate articulation 傜 with the person radical.

Thinking more broadly, Stojnić and Lepore suggest that we should always look for the offensiveness of slur terms in the associations of their articulations, and that the offensiveness that we find there is sufficient to explain what's bad about slurs without necessarily appealing to any kind of prohibition on the use of slurs. These claims take Stojnić and Lepore directly into dialogue with a paper that Lepore and I wrote on pejorative tone.

What I'll do in this paper is offer a few lines of defense or counter argument around the points that Lepore and Stone (2018) make in that work. I'll suggest that even if prohibitions might not carry the load that Anderson and Lepore say they do, it's still clear that slurs (and many other kinds of offensive words) are prohibited. This prohibition does sometimes shape the social implications of their use. Finally, while it's clear that articulations do have associations, I will try to present a range of arguments that show that words also have associations. It may well be the associations of slurs as words, as opposed to the associations of their articulations, that underpin the offensiveness of tokens of slurs. Thus, while the attention to articulations and associations in Stojnić and Lepore's book is, in my opinion, an important advance, I would not draw the radical conclusions they draw from their reflections.

2. The intuitive significance of articulations

One way to join Stojnić and Lepore in their appreciation of articulations is to observe that articulations are given a special place in folk theories of the causal effects of language. That's particularly evident in the principles that govern fantasy worlds, where readers readily accept

magical workings of language that are mediated by the properties of articulations.

In Tolkien's epic, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954)*,* we discover that the gates of Moria, the famous underground Dwarven city, are inscribed with a message that says, "speak friend and enter." The runes apparently invite the audience, addressed as a friend, to speak some unstated password. In fact, though, the solution to this puzzle is simply that "friend" is the password.

For our purposes, what's notable about the inscription in the story is that that speaking the word is what opens the door. Presenting the door with the word in some other way—with an inscription for example—would not satisfy the conditions of the spell.

There's the opposite kind of magic in the manga *Death Note* (Ohba and Obata 2003-2008), where writing someone's name in the titular magical notebook engenders the person's death. Of course, talking to the book, saying someone's name, is harmless.

The contrast between the two cases shows the sensitivity of the effects of language to an appropriate articulation. The magic attaches whatever articulation it does, sometimes the spoken word, sometimes the written word, and perhaps, in other cases, to some other articulation.

Now, there is no magic in our world (as best we can tell). What these literary possibilities—these intuitive thought experiments—tell us, then, is not how language works, but rather how people are prepared to conceptualize it. If language users thought that articulations were inert, that it was the words that did the work, these fantasy logics would not be compelling. The resonance of the stories points to our everyday readiness to accept a privileged role for articulations in the workings of language.

Sensitivity to articulation seems to matter particularly for taboos around the use of language. It's very often aspects of the articulation that are taboo, not just the word or its meaning. In such examples, the properties of articulations that Stojnić and Lepore call attention to are very much in evidence.

By Jewish custom, the Hebrew name for God cannot be pronounced; it can, however, be written (although with special considerations for the disposition of these inscriptions, see Toy and Blau 1906). A distinctive prohibition against its use applies to the spoken form.

A further example comes from the taboo on the dead that many indigenous cultures maintain, particularly the indigenous cultures of Australia (Dixon 2002). These taboos prohibit speaking the name of someone who has died during a subsequent mourning period. In some communities, even similar sounding words are to be avoided—a clear constraint on articulations (reminiscent of the infamous "niggardly" controversy; see O'Hehir 2015). In other communities, the use of the name is prohibited, even to refer to other people (or nonhuman entities)

whose name involves the same form. If you think (following Kaplan 1990) that these different kinds of semantic interpretations amount to differences in vocabulary, then even this taboo is a constraint on articulations rather than a constraint on the use of words.

In sum, we should endorse the significance of articulations for our linguistic intuitions, especially when it comes to the causal and social powers of language (as manifest in fiction and taboos). Stojnić and Lepore have done a great service by connecting the discussion of slurs to this broader context.

3. Language and social norms

We can agree that articulations are important, however, while still acknowledging that articulations are just one among many levels of linguistic representation with special political and social significance.

After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian authorities insisted on describing events as a "special military operation." To call the hostilities a "war" was a politically charged description, one that could be understood (and punished) as an expression of resistance to Putin's propaganda machine and perhaps even as opposition to the regime itself (Al Jazeera 2022). Obviously, it's not merely articulating word "war" that is significant in this case. Russians continued with officially endorsed commemorations of the "Great Patriotic War," for example. Rather, the problem is the frank categorization that the scale of time, treasure, and blood at play in Ukraine merits a different kind of categorization than a mere "operation." The political repercussions of this case seem to align with observations often made about the contestation and litigation of meaning in recent work in the philosophy of language. Communities can police conventional meanings they do not wish to see used, just as they police articulations they regard as problematic.

Communities can also police speakers for expressive actions in ways that aren't easily tied down to either form or meaning. The Thai laws of Lèse-Majesté are a case in point (Connors 2002) They criminalize any expressive behavior that carries a (generally understood) message of disrespect toward the royal family. Enforcement is not limited to language; gestures or other behaviors with plain social meanings are also prohibited. In one extreme example, wearing black on the King's birthday was understood as an expression of this kind of disrespect, and led to charges under the law (Prachatal English 2014). Here too, it seems like we cannot adequately theorize the norms at play merely at the level of articulations.

It seems that some social and political rules around languages do involve articulations, but others seem to involve words, references, meanings and more. Regardless, whenever rules exist, it can mean something to break them. Speakers can use a violation of the rule to make a point—for example, to indicate the urgency and passion of their feelings, their contempt for the powers that be, or simply their inabil-

ity to formulate their ideas within the bounds of propriety. For that reason, Lepore and Stone argued that the interpretation of slurs as offensive is often colored by the fact that speakers who use them are self-consciously failing to conform to an established norm.

This is the reason why I think that just establishing the associations of articulations, and their often-problematic status, doesn't necessarily obviate the need to invoke prohibitionism in giving a full account of the offensiveness of slurs.

4. Words, articulations, and associations

My assessment of associations matches my assessment of prohibitions. Already in this paper, I have argued that it is crucial to recognize taboo articulations, but that it is also necessary to situate such taboos among the many kinds of prohibitions that exist in language and culture. In a similar way, I claim that it is often crucial to theorize associations at the level of articulations, but that it is also necessary to situate such associations among the many different levels of analysis where language carries associations. All those different kinds of associations may well be relevant to the treatment of inflammatory language.

In fact, in the cognitive science of language, the most influential appeals to association have been found at the level of words or concepts. A famous example is Collins and Quillian's (1969) spreading activation theory of semantic memory and priming. They proposed that the activation of a concept in memory facilitates the processing of associated concepts. Classic examples of such facilitation—an occurrence of "dog" speeding recognition of the word "cat" or the word "bark", and occurrence of "come" speeding recognition of the word "go"—clearly indicate the semantic or conceptual basis for moving from one word to another. Similarity of sound or form isn't what drives semantic priming—as the name itself of course makes clear.

Cognitive science has a rich tradition of work that explains problematic attitudes and judgments on the part of speakers in terms of associations. That tradition does not straightforwardly support Stojnić and Lepore's interpretation of associations, however. Instead, it builds on theories of semantically based facilitation, like Collins and Quillian's. One influential paradigm comes from implicit association tests (Greenwald et al 1998) that purport to reveal the problematic stereotypes that influence subjects subconsciously as they perform language processing tasks (and other tasks with stimuli associated with target groups). The received explanation is that experimental effects—typically, faster or more accurate responses for stereotype-aligned judgments—reflect the facilitation engendered by subjects' biased and stereotyped conceptual networks. For example, if subjects have a concept of Blackness that is associated with concepts of poverty or crime, then they'll be more disposed and faster to draw inferences about crime in contexts where the concept of Blackness has been activated. Again, those are associations

at the level of concepts, not at the level of words or articulations, at least the way the theories are generally presented.

For Stojnić and Lepore, however, it's the articulations and their associations that are primary, that are really driving the show. Can they respond to evidence in favor of semantic associations? I think they can, to a surprising degree, because of the surprising richness of textual associations as a proxy for semantic reasoning—a point brought home over the last decade by computational models of "distributional semantics."

Already in the 1950s, the linguist Firth famously linked studies of semantics to studies of textual associations with his slogan "you shall know a word by the company it keeps" (1957:11). In computational linguistics and cognitive computational modeling, researchers have operationalized this suggestion to demonstrate how much inference can be guided just by distributional similarity across linguistic articulations.

The word2vec model (Mikolov et al 2013), for example, induces vector representations—that is, numerical coordinates in a high-dimensional space—to capture trends in the co-occurrences of words in gigantic internet-scale corpora. These representations just summarize, as Firth would put it, the company a word tends to keep. But you can nevertheless analyze these vectors to discover indicators for morphological relations like the difference between singular and plural, for semantic relations like the marking of gender in the words "king" and "queen," for general knowledge like the relations between countries and their capitals, and for harmful stereotypes such as the problematically gendered textual associations of "sewing" as feminine on the one hand and "carpentry" as masculine on the other (Bolukbasi et al 2016).

Often these observations or findings are taken to imply that textual associations can be a perfect proxy for semantic associations, meaning that, from the point of view of Stojnić and Lepore's argument, the associations of articulations capture all semantic associations and more. But this expansive interpretation of models like word2vec is tendentious. Finley et al (2017), for example, in their analysis of semantic inferences and distributional textual representations, find that only a small number of semantic relationships are well modeled in the vector embedding space, and those tend to be relationships that have extremely clear signatures in the distribution of frequent, correlated items.

This is a fast-moving research area—but the very pace of progress is a telling indication that questions about the difference between textual associations and semantic associations are questions for science more broadly, not just questions about philosophical intuitions. In fact, there are some spectacular examples in the literature that show that our intuitions about forms are misleading: speakers tend to overattribute to articulations properties that ultimately might better be characterized as semantic. (There is perhaps an echo of the magical understanding of the articulations of language I opened with in Section 2.)

The word "moist", as studied by Thibodeau (2016), is a good example. Lots of people hate the word "moist". When you ask why, they tend to speculate that it's the phonological properties of the word that are the cause of their displeasure. As one participant put it, "it just has an ugly sound that makes whatever you're talking about sound gross." However, Thibodeau and colleagues found instead that a better explanation for people's unpleasant experience with the word was its semantic associations with disgusting bodily functions. With the case of "moist" in mind, one should be very skeptical of one's intuitions that it's somehow the form of a word that is making it objectionable, rather than something about what property or referent the word evokes.

How might we go about distinguishing between associations at the level of meaning and associations at the level of form? One of the exciting contributions of Stojnić and Lepore's book is to press us to ask this question. I'm intrigued at the direction of research that it leads to, which I'll briefly explain in closing,

A good way to distinguish between words and articulations is provided by verbs. In many languages, verbs have productive morphology, which means that you can encounter a verb as a word through an articulation—through a specific form—that you may never have encountered before at all, and that you certainly have not encountered frequently enough for you to link that form with specific associations.

But verbs can be inflammatory, just as nouns and adjectives can. Adam Sennet and David Copp (2020) call attention to pejorative verbs—verbs for behaviors that are derived from slur terms and incorporate denigrating stereotypes. In English, verb morphology is comparatively simple, so Sennet and Copp can't give us English examples of the productive slurring character of pejorative verbs across a generative class of articulations. But we might hypothesize that there could be slurring verbs in languages with productive morphology. For such verbs, you might point to a rare or unattested morphological form of this slurring verb as a slur whose offensiveness must depend on the word that it's made of, not of the form, since the form has never been previously articulated.

As a morphologically impoverished English speaker, I don't have much to add about the cross-linguistic productivity of slurring verbs, but it seems like an important topic, and finding examples of this kind would be quite interesting. Nevertheless, rather than leaving the phenomenon as a mere speculative possibility, I'd like to point to a possibly related case to suggests that productive slurring verbs might not be so hard to find.

What I'll be using is the Japanese verb "yagaru" (Protonstorm 2021), which is a suffix that fits into the productive morphology of the Japanese verb. It shows contempt for whoever is doing the action in a way that in certain contexts and registers can be inflammatory. As an example, consider this example:

何を かんがえやがったんだ
nani-o kangae-yagat-ta-n-da
What-acc think-yagaru-past-compl-be
What is it that you were fucking thinking?

It is, as the saying goes, "a nasty question."

The challenging suggestion here would be that "yagaru" inflection productively adds contemptuous tone to a verb but does so by creating forms and articulations that you may never have heard before. If that's right, then it seems necessary to associate the tone with the morpheme, not the articulation. It's the morpheme that's doing the work. An analogous slur would show the limitations of thinking about associations purely at the level of articulations. It would show that we cannot dispense with the other associations for words, concepts, and objects in the world that psychologists regularly postulate and theorize.

5. *Conclusion*

In sum, Stojnić and Lepore's book has convinced me that articulations are an important part of the story of the offensiveness of inflammatory language. But I'm not ready to abandon prohibitions as part of the explanation, nor am I ready to abandon associations at the levels of words or concepts as an important explanatory tool to describe the effects of slurs and pinpoint their offensive nature.

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