

# *Inflammatory Content: Reply to Stojnić and Lepore's Inflammatory Language*<sup>1</sup>

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*In their Inflammatory Language, Stojnić and Lepore present four major criticisms of content-based views of pejorative language: 1) the Projection Argument; 2) the Hyperprojection Argument; 3) the Specificity Argument; and 4) the Reclamation Argument. This paper argues that a content-based view can adequately respond to each of these criticisms. The paper goes on to consider their positive view, the Articulation Account, and argues that it suffers from being both under-specified and overly ambitious. Even when the view is plausibly precisified as a functional role theory of articulations, a serious dilemma arises: focusing on the sound or shape of the articulation is problematic when considering counterexamples like the racist use of 'Monday' as code for the N-word, and focusing on the functional role of the articulation is problematic when considering how little functional similarity there is between the Mandarin demonstrative term (那个) and the N-word. The paper also presents the applications of two external criticisms deriving from the Identity Thesis and the Framework Fallacy and concludes that the Articulation Account falls short of being a leading contender in the analytic space of views for pejorative language.*

**Keywords:** Slurs; pejoratives; hate speech; philosophy of language.

<sup>1</sup> This paper indirectly mentions pejorative terms like the N-word with either 'the N-word' or 'n\*' depending on which is most grammatically appropriate.

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What white people have to do is try to find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a n\* in the first place. Because I am not a n\*, I am a man! But if you think I'm a n\*, it means you need him. And the question the white population of this country has got to ask itself ... If I am not the n\* here, and you the white people invented him, then you've got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that, whether or not it's able to ask [itself] that question.

-James Baldwin, interview with Kenneth Clark, 1963

## *Introduction*

In their *Inflammatory Language*, Stojnić and Lepore present four major arguments against content-based views of pejorative language which are presented in Section 1. In Section 2, I argue that a content-based view can adequately respond to each of these criticisms. Section 3 goes on to consider their positive view, the *Articulation Account*, and argues that it suffers from being both under-specified and overly ambitious.

### *1. Arguments against content-based views*

Stojnić and Lepore (2025) offer four major arguments against content-based views of pejoratives:<sup>2</sup>

1. The Projection Argument
2. The Hyperprojection Argument
3. The Specificity Argument
4. The Reclamation Argument

Understanding the Projection Argument requires understanding the phenomenon of projectivity where the offensiveness of a pejorative term appears to scope out from not just logical and intensional operators like negation and attitude report verbs but also from questions, event quantifiers, tense operators, and fictional contexts.<sup>3</sup> Consider the following examples:

- (1) Negation: Baldwin is not an n\*.
- (2) Attitude report: Mary believes that Baldwin is an n\*.
- (3) Question: Is Baldwin an n\*?
- (4) Event Quantification: Every time the firm hires an n\* Mary complains.

<sup>2</sup> Content-based theories explain pejorative words like racial slurs primarily through their semantic contents. Prominent examples include Hom (2008), Hom and May (2013, 2018), and Neufeld (2019).

<sup>3</sup> Ordinary predicates do not typically scope out of embedded environments. Consider sentences like: “Baldwin is not a Ukrainian”, “Mary believes that Baldwin is a Ukrainian”, and “Is Baldwin a Ukrainian?”. When sincerely uttered, the speaker takes no positive stand on whether Baldwin is a Ukrainian. In the negation case, the speaker even explicitly rejects it. So there is no sense in which an attitude toward Baldwin being a Ukrainian shines through the embedded context. In each case, the particular linguistic operator (negation, attitude report verb, and interrogative) completely seals off the semantic content of the predicate, leaving nothing further that the speaker is committed to.

- (5) Tense Operators: That n\* Baldwin was late for work yesterday.
- (6) Fiction: “Tell me this one thing. How much is a n\* supposed to take?” (Morrison 1987: 289)<sup>4</sup>

The Projection Argument holds that since offensive potential appears to scope out of all of these embedded environments, and semantic content does not, the offensive potential of a pejorative term like the N-word is not identical to its semantic content.<sup>5</sup> For example, in (2), the offensiveness of the N-word is not completely sealed in the attitude report and scopes out to indicate something about the racist attitude of the speaker. Contrast that with “Mary believes that Baldwin is a Ukrainian” where the embedded clause is completely sealed and does not allow any scoping out of attitudes.

Hyperprojection is the observation that projection of offensive potential extends to quotation and phonological variants (what Stojnić and Lepore call *inheritance cases*):<sup>6</sup>

- (7) Quotation: “You can really only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a “n\*”.”<sup>7</sup>
- (8) Phonological variation: the Mandarin demonstrative term (‘那个’), which acoustically resembles the N-word, and corresponds to the English filler word ‘uh’.<sup>8</sup>

The Hyperprojection Argument is simply the Projection Argument augmented with cases of quotation and phonological variation.<sup>9</sup> Since offensive potential appears to scope out of quotation and through mere phonological similarity, and semantic content does not, the offensive potential of a pejorative term like the N-word is not identical to its semantic content.

The third major argument is the Specificity Argument which takes the form of an apparent dilemma facing content theories of pejoratives that Stojnić and Lepore attribute directly to Hornsby (2001):

Is it possible, for every derogatory word, to spell out the faulty consequences to which anyone who uses it is committed? If a coarse articulation of the attitudes of those who endorse uses of a derogatory word is attempted, then

<sup>4</sup> The N-word fully articulated in the original text.

<sup>5</sup> The argument has been well-documented: Cruse (1986), Kaplan (1999), Potts (2005, 2007), Hom (2008, 2010, 2012, 2020), Richard (2008), Anderson and Lepore (2013), Camp (2013) Hom and May (2013, 2025), Cepollaro (2015), and Langton (2018).

<sup>6</sup> See Stojnić and Lepore (2025: 74). The expansion of the projection argument to include cases of quotation and inheritance are also well-documented in the literature; see Hom (2008, 2020) and Hom and May (2025).

<sup>7</sup> Baldwin (1963), N-word fully articulated in original text. Note that this is a case of double quotation.

<sup>8</sup> See Fadel (2020).

<sup>9</sup> As Stojnić and Lepore (2025: 75) notes, inheritance cases are “particularly puzzling for content-based accounts: the offensive potential is inherited even though no slur is either used or mentioned”.

differences between different derogatory words will be ignored. But if a fine-grained articulation is attempted, it will not be credible that what we spell out are regularly consequences accruing to the commitments of speakers who apply the word.

Under the first horn of the dilemma is a coarse-grained specification of the negative content of a pejorative term. The problem is that there are distinct slurs that target the same group that seem to have different potential to offend. The assumption seems to be that what the content theorist must say about the N-word holds for all other racial pejoratives for African Americans, yet there are some pejoratives for African Americans that do not reach the maximal offensive potential of the N-word.

Under the second horn of the dilemma is a fine-grained specification of the negative content. The problem is that a speaker can disavow any particular element of the proposed, bigoted content and yet competently speak about targeted members of the slur. Consider the example of the reformed bigot from Stojnić and Lepore:

- (9) I have nothing but respect and admiration for S\*'s.; S\*'s don't deserve negative moral evaluation because of their group membership.

Such a speaker "would not be manifesting linguistic incompetence, even if the choice of words is insensitive (and retains its pejorative punch)" (Stojnić and Lepore 2025: 20). My interpretation of (9) is that such a speaker simply *does* manifest linguistic incompetence but let us consider a weaker version of the problem. Consider an *unreformed* bigoted speaker who utters:

- (10) I hate S\*'s but not because they have the common stereotypical property, P<sub>1</sub>; S\*'s are despicable for other reasons.

The unreformed bigoted speaker does not seem to manifest linguistic incompetence even when they explicitly reject a property that the content-theorist attributes to the semantic content of the pejorative, S\*. The assumption seems to be that linguistic competence with a term requires the speaker to know each and every component of the term's semantic content.

The problem under the second horn of the dilemma is a variant of Moore's Open Question Argument in metaethics. The unreformed bigot seems to be able to felicitously and competently ask questions like:

- (11) I know this g is not P<sub>1</sub>, but are they still an s\*?

If this is a felicitous question for a competent, unreformed bigot (where members of group g are targeted by a slur s\* that encodes at least the stereotypical property P<sub>1</sub>), then it does not seem like s\* encodes P<sub>1</sub> as part of its semantic content. The open question generalizes to every property component that a content theorist might plausibly assign to any pejorative slur term, and so the content view is supposedly undermined.

The fourth major argument that Stojnić and Lepore present against content theories of pejoratives is the Reclamation Argument. Reclamation is the phenomenon whereby in-group members repurpose a pejorative term previously used by out-group members to target them. The repurposing is typically political in nature, e.g. signaling mutual allegiance, building camaraderie, defusing the pejorative potential of the term by taking control away from oppressive out-group members, etc. Their negative argument considers two specific content theories: a semantic, ambiguity account and a pragmatic, echoic account. Both theories “offer no explanation as to why it is virtually impossible for out-group speakers to eliminate ambiguity concerning their attitudes regardless of how favorable the context might be” (Stojnić and Lepore 2025: 78). Assuming that there are no other alternative explanations for reclamation for content-based accounts, Stojnić and Lepore conclude that “[t]ogether with the problems raised by hyper-projectivity, inheritance, and the specificity challenge, they motivate a search for a non-content based account” (2025: 79). In the next section, I argue that such a conclusion is certainly premature, if not ill-guided.

## 2. Responses to Stojnić and Lepore

With regard to Stojnić and Lepore’s criticisms of older responses to the phenomenon of hyperprojection, their points are well-taken and were previously addressed in the literature as the *Predicative Response* (Hom 2020). According to this response, intuitions of projection and hyperprojection occur because “when speakers predicate with the derogatory content of [s\*] (in almost any context), they do two things that are often offensive: (1) they force hearers to entertain a degenerate way of classifying the world, and (2) they signal that they themselves approve of this classificatory scheme as normatively appropriate” (Hom 2020: 299) I will not rehearse the entirety of Hom (2020) but let me remind the audience of the two core tenets of *Forced Imagery Triggering* (FIT) and the *Conversational Implicature of Predication* (CIP) that compose the Predicative Response:

The response rests on properly distinguishing between assertion and predication. While assertion is (roughly) the speech act of putting forward a proposition and endorsing it as true, usually with a sentence that has assertoric mood, predication can be conceived as the cognitive application of a property to an object. The application of a property to an object requires the proper sorting of the object relative to the rule that is given by the property. For example, to apply the predicate “is green” to an object *o* is to sort *o* relative to green things and nongreen things. This is to take seriously the idea that propositional content is the object of the attitudes and that propositional content stands for what we cognitively entertain in understanding a sentence. So if the conceptual content associated with a slur is deeply vile or unjust, it makes sense that hearers are disturbed when they predicate with its content. To sort the world according to a deeply racist concept, for example, is to think of the world as the racist does. For nonracists, that way

of looking at the world is flawed and disturbing. *Even when a slurring sentence is negated, conditionalized, and so on, predication itself is not undone.* Such a predication forces on the hearer a particular way of thinking that is offensive, and this is one part of the explanation that the derogatory content of a slur appears to scope out when embedded. Call this the *Forced Imagery Triggering* (FIT) account. (Hom 2020: 298, emphasis added)

In predicating with the detailed and disturbing content of [s\*], hearers who don't share the ideology that supports [s\*] are typically offended in having to view the world this way. In addition, the speaker is also pragmatically implicating her general endorsement that [s\*] encodes an appropriate way of dividing the world. This higher order, general endorsement is also offensive to hearers who do not share in the ideology that supports this conceptual scheme. Call this the *Conversational Implicature of Predication* (CIP) account. (Hom 2020: 299)

The Predicative Response to the Hyperprojectivity Argument says that predicating the semantic content of pejoratives can be doubly offensive to hearers: a) because the content is so disagreeable to anti-bigots; and b) because predicating with this content is to endorse this way sorting the world. This offense can be generated *whenever* the pejorative is predicated, and so this includes all of the embedding cases.

Let me discuss an additional aspect that contributes to the hyperprojection worry. Because racial pejorative terms like the N-word are socially taboo, and directly asserting them can incur steep social costs, this motivates the recognition of a new kind of speech act that I call *linguistic ventriloquism*. This occurs when a speaker uses language in a way that is technically defeasible but with the intention of triggering the offensive content of the language. Triggering offensive content is sometimes legitimate (e.g., a pedagogical context where the instructor deems it necessary for understanding the nature of bigotry, or a case brief where a judge is writing about the complexities of hate speech in their particular ruling) but in a deeply oppressive society, the act is more often for the purpose of indirectly denigrating the target members of the audience with plausible deniability. In this context, an out-group speaker may also be seeking to vicariously experience uttering a racial pejorative (either as reclaimed or non-reclaimed). For some, there can be a perverse kind of linguistic thrill in uttering the N-word and pretending to publicly violate social taboos, either as a racist or as an out-group member using the reclaimed pejorative. Because bigotry so thoroughly inhabits contemporary society, it is difficult to escape the potential, nearby interpretation that any embedded expression of the N-word by a non-Black speaker is either straightforwardly racist or a form of linguistic ventriloquism. Examples include using the synonym for 'stingy' that sounds like the N-word at a budget meeting in front of a mostly African American audience<sup>10</sup>, vocalizing the Mandarin demonstrative term (‘那个’), which acoustically resembles the N-word, singing the fully articulated N-word on stage at a concert<sup>11</sup>, and using the word

<sup>10</sup> See Hom (2008: footnote 17).

<sup>11</sup> This occurred at a Kendrick Lamar concert in 2018. See BBC News (2018).

'Monday' as code for the N-word.<sup>12</sup> Some of these examples may be benign though the last example is clearly *racist* linguistic ventriloquism. In some cases, there are potential off-setting contextual factors, e.g. the use/mention distinction, the pedagogical goals involved in such utterances, etc. But there are also very nearby racist interpretations that too easily suggest that such a speaker, especially one who vocalizes their point with more than sufficient frequency and intensity, is performing the act of linguistic ventriloquism to denigrate African Americans through an incredibly thin linguistic veil. This is what makes the classroom examples difficult to assess, and why the pedagogical decision procedures are so delicate.<sup>13</sup> Together with the Predicative Response, there are good reasons to think that a pragmatic explanation for hyperprojectivity is successful for content-based views.

Turning to the Specificity Argument, recall it was presented in the form of a dilemma. On the first horn, if the content for a racial pejorative term is too coarse-grained (e.g. *despicable for being a g*), then it will be applicable for different pejoratives for the same group where those pejoratives vary in their offensive potential. On the second horn, if the content for a racial pejorative is too fine-grained, then it faces a form of the Open Question argument. The content theorist has the tools to saw off both horns. For the first horn, it must be recognized that a certain level of theoretical abstraction is not only helpful but required. If we look too closely at the facts on the ground, then what we find are all kinds of lunatic ideologies that motivate all kinds of lunatic linguistic practices. I suppose that it might be an interesting and perhaps even helpful socio-linguistic project to provide a complete taxonomy of the various slurs for African Americans along with their underlying nuances, histories, and ideological influences. However, this kind of empirical work only minimally engages with higher-order conceptual and philosophical questions of meaning. For the second horn, the Open Question argument fails to acknowledge that the externalist nature of the content of a pejorative divorces linguistic competence from conceptual knowledge. Just as speakers could competently use the word 'water' without knowing almost anything about the chemical makeup of its referent, speakers can competently use a pejorative like the N-word without knowing almost anything about the social or normative composition of its content.<sup>14</sup> On either horn of the dilemma, content-based views have powerful responses and so the Specificity Argument is defused.

<sup>12</sup> See Zimmer (2012).

<sup>13</sup> Collaborative work on this issue is forthcoming with Robert May and Brian Soucek.

<sup>14</sup> There are obviously significant differences between natural kind terms and racial pejorative terms, and so the extension of semantic externalism from the former to the latter requires a significant argument. Such an argument would extend beyond the scope of the current project but see Hom (2008) for at least initial reasons that favor this extension. Thanks to Ray Buchanan for helpful discussion on this point.

The Reclamation Argument against content-based views is puzzlingly weak as it relies on the mistaken assumption that the only semantic content view of reclamation relies on ambiguity, and the only pragmatic content view of reclamation is an echoic one.<sup>15</sup> Hom (2020) acknowledges a fundamental worry with ambiguity accounts of reclamation; namely that they risk making the act of reclamation vacuous. Instead, a different kind of pragmatic view of reclamation is offered; one that is made available by the semantic content expressed by pejoratives:<sup>16</sup>

Appropriation should be seen as an act of semantic protest to the wide endorsement of the ideology that supports the appropriated slur. A speaker S1 demonstrates that she stands against the ideology by predicating the slur [s]\* to another discourse participant S2 where S1 and S2 both belong to group g. The act of appropriation puts oneself and one's allies up as targets of the slur. Appropriately understood as not self-hating or a poor attempt at humor, the speaker of the appropriated slur demonstrates that she stands against the ideological scheme that provides the rule for sorting according to the slur. This is one way of cancelling wide endorsement. Initially, self-predication is only coherent as either an act of self-hatred, false consciousness, or bad humor. So hearers will search for alternative explanations for a cooperative speaker self-inflicting such disturbing content—for example, for some political purpose. (Hom 2020: 302)

The primary thrust of Stojnić and Lepore's criticism rests on the lack of explanation for why reclamation for the N-word is closed off to out-group members. On the pragmatic account presented in Hom (2020), the answer is that for out-group speakers, the affirmative alternative explanations for their pejorative utterances are quite distant because of the prevalence of bigotry (and the fact that pejoratives encode contents that express that bigotry), and because the speech act of linguistic ventriloquism is so correspondingly close by. Note the simplicity of the pragmatic explanation given the content semantically encoded by the pejorative. It also strikes me that the strength of the barrier for out-group members to make use of reclaimed pejoratives is somewhat exaggerated. For the word 'gay', the gay community intentionally dismantled barriers for its use so that non-gay speakers could use the reclaimed word. It has also been reported to me that certain out-group members (members of the Latino community) do felicitously make use of the reclaimed N-word among African American discourse participants.<sup>17</sup> Because members of these particular Latino communities commonly experience the bigotry and the injustice associated with the unreclaimed N-word, the pragmatic explanation is more closely available, and the possibility of linguistic ventriloquism is more distant. With

<sup>15</sup> See Stojnić and Lepore (2025: 78).

<sup>16</sup> The pragmatic move is actually consistent with semantic ambiguity, but I will not argue for this here.

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to Angelina Alvarez-Carrera, Luis Arbelaez, and Jordan Botello for their helpful discussion on this topic.

this plausible pragmatic explanation, content-based views of pejorative terms are shielded from the Reclamation Argument.

### 3. *Assessing the articulation account*

With content-based views defended from the Stojnić and Lepore criticisms, we turn to evaluate their positive theory called the *Articulation Account*. An articulation is a sound or shape that is tokened as a physical event. Often, there is overlap between the tokening of an articulation and the tokening of a linguistic expression. When I utter the word, ‘dog’ (or write it down on a piece of paper), I token a particular articulation that is also a tokening of a word. Someone else can also token that articulation but in a different volume or pitch (or in cursive rather than block print). Articulations can also be produced by accident without any linguistic intention. For example, if the wind blows through a spinning windmill above, the soundwaves can combine in such a way that create the auditory articulation of ‘dog’ for hearers below. The view holds that articulations that are standardly associated with pejorative words are the primary vehicles of analysis, not the words themselves, and these articulations automatically trigger negative associations. These associations explain inheritance and reclamation, as well as the other data surrounding pejoratives. In their own words: “Our thesis is ... that certain articulations automatically trigger negative associations, which come to be associated with these articulations through a web of complex causal, socio-historical, cultural, and psychological factors” (Stojnić and Lepore 2025: 117).

As initially stated, the thesis of the Articulation Account faces two initial problems. The first problem is *valence variation*, or the fact that articulations can have associations that are positive, negative, or neutral. Consider the racist articulation of slurs in conversations with exclusively racist participants. Their associations with this language are not negative (or at least not negative to the extent that they are for anti-racists). Racists think that such words are appropriate and fitting for their targets. It is part of their natural worldview (perhaps even one ordained by God) so some if not all of their associations will be non-negative – the racist is happy with racist associations.<sup>18</sup> Another case of valence variation occurs in contexts of reclamation. Such a context exclusively involves members of the in-group who are targeted by the racist use of the term, but the articulation has *positive* associations of solidarity, alliance, collective resistance, mutual support, etc.<sup>19</sup> Finally, there are articulations that are similar to racial pejoratives and yet invoke no negative or pejorative association. For example, consider the

<sup>18</sup> The example suggests something like an assessment-sensitive analysis given by MacFarlane (2014). Thanks to Ray Buchanan for pointing out this connection.

<sup>19</sup> Oddly, these cases are explicitly acknowledged. See Stojnić and Lepore (2025: 78 and 120).

C-word that is a slur targeting Chinese people. The words ‘chin’, ‘sink’, ‘ching’, ‘ink’, etc. display articulatory similarity and yet have no negative association whatsoever.<sup>20</sup> The case can also be reversed with words that display no articulatory similarity and yet have the same negative association, e.g., the example of racists who use the word ‘Monday’ as code for the N-word. Notice crucially that ‘Monday’ does not plausibly encode the sound or shape of the N-word but the N-word itself. This undercuts the Stojnić and Lepore position that articulations are the primary vehicles of analysis over words.

The second initial problem for the thesis of the Articulation Account as initially stated is *automaticity*. Not all the associations with pejorative articulations are automatic. Some can be conceptual and hence inferential. It even appears as if there is an internal contradiction in Stojnić and Lepore’s statement of their view. Contrast the statement of their thesis above with what they say here: “*This is not to say, of course, that tokening an articulation automatically causes offense. What’s automatically triggered is the pejorative effect—an open-ended cluster of cognitive/affective associations*”. (Stojnić and Lepore 2025: 111, emphasis added)

The initial problems raise the question of what exactly is being automatically triggered by an articulation? The full thesis refers to a complex web of ‘socio-historical, cultural, and psychological factors’. Their most definitive elaboration of this point occurs as a continuation of the previous quote:

Triggering these associations can, in certain circumstances, for certain individuals, cause offense, and an agent can intentionally token the slur in order to weaponize this effect to cause offense. But, we’ve seen, it can equally be exploited for other purposes—to create a particular kind of an effect, pedagogical, artistic, or other; and it can, in turn, cause a range of other emotions and reactions in the audience, besides offense, depending on a variety of factors, including the circumstances of tokening, the speaker’s intentions and audiences’ recognition of those intentions, and the audiences’ familiarity with, and situatedness within, the socio-cultural and historical context that grounds the relevant associations, and their individual sensibilities and proclivities. In all these cases, it is because the articulations give rise to these associations that they can be used and abused to create these various effects; and it is these articulations, not slurs, that trigger the associations. (Stojnić and Lepore 2025: 111–112)

Taking a step back, note that aside from distinguishing articulations from words, there is most certainly widespread agreement that complex, socio-historical, cultural, and psychological facts determine the negative effects of pejorative language. But until we are told what the relevant facts are and what the relevant associations are, it is not clear what we have actually gained. To assess the theory, we have to be told a lot more about what the historical contexts are and how they ground these associations.

<sup>20</sup> See Jeshion (2025) and Ostertag (forthcoming) for many more examples in the same vein.

With the backdrop of these concerns, I interpret their theory as holding that articulations play certain *functional roles*. Articulations are associated with complex functions that pair input domains with output results where input domains include a wide array of socio-historical, cultural, and psychological factors including the initial beliefs, dispositions and values of the conversational participants, and where output results include updated beliefs, dispositions, and emotional reactions which can be negative, positive, or neutral.

To help clarify, let us refine their thesis to avoid both of the initial worries of valence variation and automaticity, and make explicit the functional role aspect of the view. Following their lead, let an *articulation* (an event) be any sound or shape (commonly associated with the tokening of words but not essentially so). Let an *association* (a relation) be a function that takes a complex domain as input (including a speaker's beliefs, values, history, culture, and various facts about the context) and gives a complex domain as output (including a hearer's beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral dispositions). Consider the following refinement on the Articulation Account:

*Functional Role Articulationism (FRA)*: Articulations play certain functional roles in instantiating complex association functions whose overall domains include relevant causal, socio-historical, cultural, and psychological factors. In this way, articulations generate certain pejorative effects.

Consider the kinds of detailed associations that must be part of these functions. For an articulation of the straightforwardly racist N-word, the view must specify something like the following association function:

Input	Output
Speaker: member of the out-group	Hearer's Emotional State: offense, anger, fear
Hearer: member of the in-group	Hearer's Belief Update: speaker is a bigot
Speaker beliefs: biased against members of the in-group	Hearer's Disposition: terminate the conversation, explicitly sanction the speaker, punch the speaker
Personal relationship between speaker/hearer: none	
Time: 21st century	
Location: United States	
Non-fictional	

Table 1: Partial Specification of the Functional Profile for the N-word (racist)

Next consider the specification of the reclamatory aspect of the association for the N-word:

Input	Output
Speaker: member of the in-group	Hearer's Emotional State: camaraderie, support, alliance
Hearer: member of the in-group	Hearer's Belief Update: speaker is an ally
Speaker beliefs: non-biased against members of the in-group	Hearer's Disposition: acknowledge the speaker as an ally
Personal relationship between speaker/hearer: friendly	
Time: 21st century	
Location: United States	
Non-fictional	

Table 2: Partial Specification of the Functional Profile for the N-word (reclamatory)

It is these kinds of complex, ‘open-ended’, functional pairings that make up the individual associations that in turn compose the entire functional role of an articulation. But notice that this initial attempt at the partial specification of the functional role for the N-word is still a massive simplification. The association function must take into consideration individual histories and psychologies.<sup>21</sup> For example, in the straightforwardly racist portion of the function, there is a tremendous amount of variation in the hearer’s potential dispositions for action. Consider the different ways such an articulation could play out depending on just the different social roles and power dynamics of the conversation. For example, contrast how a Black employee being slurred with the N-word by their non-Black boss would (or even could) respond with how a wealthy and powerful Black superstar like LeBron James might respond to being slurred with the N-word by a non-Black fan on the court during a game. Individual roles and power dynamics in a context must be incorporated into the function.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.1 *Internal criticisms of the articulation account*

Upon careful reflection, the details of the functional specification for pejorative articulations seem impossibly fine-grained. There are many other specific factors that must be accommodated for a full specification

<sup>21</sup> As Stojnić and Lepore note, “members of a target group might carry different, more nuanced associations, reflecting direct experience with a history of discrimination and oppression” (2025: 121).

<sup>22</sup> See Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018) for a detailed consideration of these kinds of conversational kinematics.

of the functional role of an articulation of the N-word. Such factors are made salient by questions like:

- What kind of facial expression does the speaker have?
- What kind of vocal tone did the speaker use?
- Is the context a physically dangerous one for the hearer?
- What are the relative genders of the speaker and hearer?
- What are the relative physical sizes of the speaker and hearer?
- Have the speaker and hearer had previous conversations?
- Is the hearer more/less sensitive to racial slurs?
- Is the hearer more/less inclined to take racial antagonism personally?
- Does the hearer believe that males are generally more racist than females?
- Does the hearer believe that blonde-haired speakers are generally more racist than brunette-haired speakers?
- Has the hearer been having a good/bad day?<sup>23</sup>
- Has the hearer skipped lunch that day making them more/less cranky?
- Does the speaker remind the hearer of a racist colleague?

A difference in any of the above input factors can change the output results of an articulation of the N-word. Furthermore, the list of questions specifying potentially impactful contextual factors seems endless. To offer a complete theory, the function must specify the exhaustive range of causes and effects associated with hearing the sounds or seeing the shapes of the word. Such a detailed specification is very much non-trivial and potentially quite disparate. Associations can be extremely extensive, varied, and haphazard. Their explanations may reside at a very specific psychological level for individual agents. Every quirk, bias, misunderstanding, misconception, background assumption, heuristic, and cognitive habit must be reflected in a complete specification of the association function.<sup>24</sup>

The view is supposed to incorporate every functional variable involving associations having to do with articulations of pejoratives. This is an incredibly wide-ranging metatheoretic assumption. If true, then it becomes unclear what is at stake for such a view. Consider that any dynamic system can be represented functionally, e.g. chemical systems, meteorological systems, digestive systems, raindrops on a window, etc. The mere existential claim that there is a functional specification for a particular set of articulations is trivial, so much so that such a view is not even falsifiable because no meaningful prediction is produced. Perhaps Stojnić and Lepore's claim is not merely existential but also one

<sup>23</sup> See Doris (2002) for evidence from moral psychology that normative behavior is influenced by trivial contextual factors.

<sup>24</sup> Even if such an exhaustive specification is given, it is not at all clear that human behaviors and responses will be accurately predicted. Thanks to Robert May for pointing this out.

that grounds the functional specification in particular facts about society, history, culture, and psychology. To the extent that the grounding is actually specified, the view escapes the triviality of simply making the existential claim. But from the considerations above, such specificity is flagrantly absent.

The immense power attributed to FRA has another negative unintended consequence. Humans make many associations as a result of their basic cognitive architecture. The explanatory domain of FRA seems to include *anything* that might signal human significance, e.g. words, symbols, gestures, vocal intonations, facial expressions, clothing, skin tone, colors, jewelry, religious artifacts, artistic imagery, metaphors, motorcycles, tattoos, facial hair, food, etc. There seems to be no limit to the domain of associations, and hence no limit to the applicability of FRA as a *semiotic* theory of human culture. Perhaps Stojnić and Lepore would welcome such a powerful consequence of their theory but there are reasons to be suspicious.

Focusing on language, there are many articulations of words that have negative associations. Consider 'bald' which has negative associations for men perhaps involving aging and loss of sexual virility and negative associations for women perhaps involving aging and loss of femininity. There is surely a complex, functional role played by articulations of 'bald' that coordinate the complex socio-historical, cultural and psychological facts which ground these gendered and ageist associations. But what distinguishes words like 'bald' from pejoratives? There seems to be no principled difference between the articulation of terms like 'bald' and the articulations of terms like the N-word. Perhaps the negative associations for the N-word are simply far greater so this is a distinction in degree and not kind. But it is easy to construct an expression with far greater negative associations that at least rival the N-word but which itself is not intuitively a pejorative; e.g. 'narcissist Nazi pedophile'.

Other distinctions under the precisification of the Articulation Account also get the wrong intuitive results. The functional complexity of FRA actually *undermines* the ability to explain inheritance cases. Consider again the case of the N-word and the Mandarin demonstrative term (那个). The explanation of the offensive potential of the Mandarin term was supposed to be explained by its articulatory similarity to that of the N-word. But consider the overall scope of the functional roles of these two articulations. One has very specific associations relative to English and its speakers, the other has very specific associations relative to Mandarin and its speakers. For the most part, they are linguistically, geographically, historically, culturally, and psychologically distinct. Their articulations play very different functional roles, and so their similarity is actually extremely marginal. There is an incredibly small amount of overlap between these articulations when considering their overall functional roles. In fact, their overlap might occur in just

a handful of contexts—namely the one where the teacher reportedly made the observation that the Mandarin demonstrative sounds similar to the N-word. To put the point another way, of the billions of articulations of the demonstrative generated by Mandarin speakers and of the billions of articulations of the N-word generated by American-English speakers, there is almost no functional overlap whatsoever. Mandarin speakers will have many kinds of associations with the Mandarin demonstrative that they do not have with the N-word, and English speakers will have many kinds of associations with the N-word that they do not have with the Mandarin demonstrative.<sup>25</sup> With such tremendous functional dissimilarity, the articulations of the N-word and the Mandarin demonstrative are actually not very similar at all, and this undermines the explanation of the very data that Stojnić and Lepore prioritize for their view. It is worth noting here the damaging significance of this point for the Articulation Account.<sup>26</sup>

These problems form a dilemma for the Articulation Account. If the focus is on the articulation itself (sound/shape) as an explanation for pejorative potential, then the view faces difficulty from cases where articulatory resemblance is absent but pejorative potential is not (e.g. ‘Mondays’), and also from cases where pejorative potential is absent but articulatory resemblance is not (e.g. ‘chin’, ‘sink’, the reclaimed N-word). If the focus is on the articulation as satisfying a complex functional role, then the view faces difficulty in explaining inheritance cases (e.g. the functional dissimilarity between the N-word and the Mandarin demonstrative). What this highlights is the overall vagueness of Stojnić and Lepore’s presentation of the Articulation Account, and the worry that there is a vicious ambiguity with which the theory is being originally deployed.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> It is even worse when you consider the billions of natural, orthographic accidents over time that have produced either kind of articulations (e.g. awkward sneezes, wind blowing through the trees, random sound waves colliding, certain positionings of rocks, stars, or grains of sand, etc.).

<sup>26</sup> A similar argument is made in Ostertag (forthcoming).

<sup>27</sup> Lepore’s affinity for the philosophy of Donald Davidson suggests an alternative metatheoretic interpretation of their book project. Recall Davidson’s position on metaphor; roughly that there is no metaphoric content, and that metaphors are just like bumps to the head of the hearer in the attempt to cause them to think differently about something (Davidson 1978). Similarly, one might hold that beyond articulations having offensive associations, there is simply nothing further to say about pejorative language. Call the position that any theory of pejorative language is false, *Defeatism*. If this was part of their overall proposal, then the negative chapters (perhaps even together with the failure of FRA) form a kind of inductive argument against any theory of pejorative words. Note that this would make the above defense of content-based views all the more significant. But if defeatism is actually one of their goals, why keep it hidden? They would owe it to readers to explicitly own up to it and to give explicit arguments for it. Without an argument for defeatism, there is little to motivate this potential hidden assumption. Thanks to Ray Buchanan for helpful discussion on this point.

### 3.2 External criticisms of the articulation account

While the previous section addresses criticisms that are internal to the Articulation Account, there are significant criticisms that are theoretically external to the Articulation Account. The first is the *Identity Thesis* and the Racist Frege Puzzle that results from it. The second is the *Framework Fallacy*. Both problems are developed in the literature but let me present brief versions of each and apply them directly to the Articulation Account.

The Identity Thesis holds that any pejorative term,  $s^*$ , and its neutral correlate term,  $g$ , are semantically equivalent.<sup>28</sup> The result is that the two terms are co-extensive, i.e. they refer to the same set of people. The critical question arises for any theory of pejoratives: does the theory subscribe to the Identity Thesis? Though they offer no explicit confirmation, there is good reason to think that Stojnić and Lepore are committed to it.<sup>29</sup>

There are significant negative implications of the Identity Thesis. For example, it entails that sentences like “all African Americans are  $n^*s$ ” is literally true. As racist and cringeworthy as this might sound, things are even worse. Since claims like ‘all African Americans are African American’ are not only true but *necessarily* true, so too is the racist claim, ‘all African Americans are  $n^*s$ ’. The result is that such a racist claim has the same alethic status as mathematical or logical truths. One might have thought that the racist had radically *false* beliefs about the world, but not according to the Identity Thesis. Under this thesis, the racist holds deeper insight into metaphysical reality than the anti-racist who would ‘wrongly’ deny the racist claim as false.

The Identity Thesis suggests a racist version of Frege’s Puzzle. The puzzle asks what explains the cognitive difference between the following sentences as the first is trivial and knowable *a priori* while the second is non-trivial and knowable *a posteriori*:

- (12) African Americans = African Americans
- (13) African Americans =  $N^*s$

The Identity Thesis blocks the ability to explain this difference in terms of a semantic difference between the terms flanking the identity sign in (13). Like a direct reference theorist in the original Frege Puzzle, the proponent of the Identity Theory might be tempted to make use of modes of presentation (or ways of thinking) to solve the puzzle.<sup>30</sup> For Stojnić and Lepore, the corresponding move is potentially made by saying that the trivial case has no negative associations (i.e. no negative

<sup>28</sup> See Hom (2008) and Hom and May (2013, 2018, 2025).

<sup>29</sup> Stojnić and Lepore’s commitment to their wager argument (2025: 23) strongly suggests this, and Robert May reports in p.c. that Stojnić explicitly confirmed their commitment to the Identity Thesis at her colloquium at U.C. Berkeley in the spring of 2025.

<sup>30</sup> See Sennet and Copp (2017).

modes of presentation) but the non-trivial case does, and this explains their difference in cognitive significance.<sup>31</sup>

The content theorist's response is simply to invert the racist Frege puzzle so that the pejorative occurs in both identity statements:

(12')  $N^*'s = N^*'s$

(13) African Americans =  $N^*'s$

Since articulations of both identity claims would have negative associations, the negative associations can no longer distinguish their cognitive significance. If Stojnić and Lepore attempt to retreat to standard modes of presentation (perhaps generated through associations with the articulations) to distinguish the identity claims, there are already extensive arguments in the literature for why such a move does not look promising.<sup>32</sup>

To hold the Identity Thesis precludes the elegant, simple response to the Racist Frege Puzzle available to the content-based theorist who distinguishes the semantic content of a pejorative from that of its neutral counterpart: *there simply is no puzzle*. For content views, the terms  $s^*$  and  $g$  are *not* semantically identical and hence non-coreferential. So believing that  $s^*'s$  are  $s^*'s$  is like believing that unicorns are unicorns (trivially true), while believing that  $g's$  are  $s^*'s$  is like believing that white horses are unicorns (false). Because the embedded identity claims express distinct propositions, you should rationally believe the first and disbelieve the second, allowing for an accurate, consistent, non-racist, representation of the world.

The final worry related to the Identity Thesis is what I call the *Baldwin Point* which directly references the epigraph at the start of this paper.<sup>33</sup> James Baldwin was a leading 20th century civil rights activist and acclaimed author on issues of race in America. He was quoted as uttering the following sentence:

(14) I am not a  $n^*$ . [I am a man]

Holding the Identity Thesis implies that Baldwin, a Black man, spoke *falsely* in making this utterance. He *is* African American, and according to the Identity Thesis, he *is* an  $n^*$ . Under the Identity Thesis, Baldwin is like the person who does not realize that beech trees are elm trees, or that aluminum is molybdenum. Though Baldwin was a leading, Black

<sup>31</sup> A lot of conceptual work would need to be filled in here, but as shown in the next paragraph, the task is moot.

<sup>32</sup> See Hom and May (2025: 644–648, and fn 22): the guiding principle against such a move is “what Schiffer calls *Frege's Constraint*: “There are distinct modes of presentation  $m$  and  $m'$  such that  $x$  believes  $y$  to be such-and-such under  $m$  and disbelieves it under  $m'$  only if  $x$  fails to realize that  $m$  and  $m'$  are modes of one and the same thing.” (1992: 502). The relevant point here is that you cannot rationally believe and disbelieve something at the same time under modes you realize are modes of the same thing.”

<sup>33</sup> This point is echoed in Hom and May (2025: 648).

civil rights activist, he was supposedly conceptually confused about his own racial identity.

The Identity Theorist is not without recourse and could appeal to *metalinguistic negation*.<sup>34</sup> An utterance like the following:

(15) I am not *cold*. [I am freezing.]

is not technically false because it has a metalinguistic interpretation whereby the speaker is denying the appropriateness of using the term, not the literal predication of the term's content:

(15<sub>M</sub>) 'Cold' does not appropriately apply to me. [I am freezing.]

The follow-up in brackets shows that *being freezing* is consistent with *being cold*, but not consistent with appropriately being called merely 'cold', and so the parallel supposedly holds in (14):

(14<sub>M</sub>) The N-word does not appropriately apply to me. [I am a man.]

The denial is of the linguistic application of the N-word to Baldwin and not of the claim that he is African American. *Being a man* is actually consistent with *being an n\** (i.e. because according to the Identity Thesis proponent, *being a man* is consistent with *being African American*).<sup>35</sup>

The metalinguistic strategy is not limited to cases of negation. The metalinguistic move is required for any sentence where there is apparently acceptable embedding of a pejorative term:

(16) If you think I'm a *n\**, then it means you need him.

(17) There are no *n\**'s.

(18) Institutions that treat Chinese as *c\**'s are racist.

(19) Every time the department interviews an asshole, George rolls his eyes.

The examples demonstrate that the metalinguistic strategy requires expansion to metalinguistic conditionalization, metalinguistic existential generalization, metalinguistic attitude reporting, metalinguistic quantification over events, etc. Unlike in the application of metalinguistic negation which was motivated in alleviating the apparent contradiction, such motivation is absent in the expanded set of cases, and so the metalinguistic strategy seems ad hoc. A further and more serious problem is that it is not even clear that metalinguistic reinterpretation uniformly works:

(16') If you think the N-word appropriately applies to me, then it means you need the N-word (to appropriately apply to me). (?)

(17') There is no one appropriately called by the N-word.

(18') Institutions that call Chinese people by the C-word are racist (?).<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See Horn (1989), Hom (2020), and Stojnić and Lepore (2025: fn 30).

<sup>35</sup> The continuation of the quote in (14) suggests that Baldwin did not agree with the consistency claim between *being an n\** and *being human*.

<sup>36</sup> The complaint against such racist institutions does not seem to center around the *linguistic* practices of the institution but rather its *material* practices.

- (19) Every time the department interviews someone appropriately called by the term ‘asshole’, George rolls his eyes. (?)<sup>37</sup>

Let the *Baldwin Point* state that when Baldwin utters (14), he speaks truly. As a Black civil rights leader who was one of the most prominent literary figures in the 20th century, it is completely implausible that Baldwin was either conceptually or linguistically confused about the N-word. It is difficult to overemphasize that this is unassailable, primary data. Baldwin is one of the foremost conceptual and linguistic experts on racial pejoratives, and content-based theorists are on concrete footing in validating his judgements. If the Baldwin Point is true, then the Identity Thesis is false.

Putting the Baldwin Point another way, we can ask what belief gets expressed when Baldwin utters (14)? Does he believe that he is not African American? Does he have a metalinguistic belief about the applicability of the N-word? The positive answers sound completely implausible. On the other hand, there is a simple, elegant, negative answer available to the content theorist: the belief Baldwin expresses with (14) is the denial of a deeply personal, degrading, belief that reflects his experiences as a victim of racial oppression. He expresses that by using the N-word to encode and reflect the racist ideology of his time. The content of the N-word is emblematic of the negative stereotypes and prescriptions that anti-Black racism stands for. The N-word is a *bad* word because it encodes viciously *bad* content, the content of racism that persists in American society from Baldwin’s time to this day. As a civil rights leader, Baldwin rejects this attempted targeting by racists with this ideological term. To cling to the Identity Thesis in the face of data like the Baldwin Point is inexplicable.

Let me turn to the last theoretically external concern for the Articulation Account. Start with the basic observation that many things have the capacity to cause offense, e.g. calling someone ‘bald’, interrupting someone in conversation, using the wrong silverware utensil, refraining from taking off one’s shoes in a traditional Japanese household, chewing with your mouth open, insufficiently tipping, facial hair, body odor, etc. There might be a causal theory that explains all of this by appealing to the socio-historical and psychological facts that ground these offensive associations. The worry of theoretical overreach has already been suggested, and I do not believe that the Articulation Account has successfully met their own explanatory challenge. But let me address the status of the challenge for content-based accounts. It is important to emphasize that *content-based accounts do not aim to provide a comprehensive account of the offensive potential of pejorative terms, nor should they*. Why should a semantic account of language

<sup>37</sup> This seems like an implausibly strained reading for (19). Change ‘dick’ for ‘asshole’ and suppose that one of the unpleasant candidates is named ‘Richard’ and then this candidate *would* be appropriately called by the term ‘Dick’. Particularly problematic for Stojnić and Lepore is the fact that the articulation of ‘dick’ is identical in both pejorative and nickname contexts.

provide a complete explanation of how socio-historical, cultural, and psychological factors affect the offense either given or taken by utterances of language? The distinction was explicit between offense and derogation, where derogation is the application or predication of the prescriptive semantic content expressed by pejoratives, and where offense, while overlapping with derogation is obviously distinct. Simply observe that some utterances can be offensive and non-derogatory (e.g. ‘bald’) while others can be non-offensive but derogatory (e.g. reclaimed utterances of the N-word between Black conversants). To misattribute the task for content theories of explaining offensiveness commits the *Framework Fallacy*: to “commit such a fallacy is to assume one’s own view from the start in order to criticize a rival. It is to saddle a rival view with commitments to which it does not actually subscribe.”<sup>38</sup> The Articulation Account commits the Framework Fallacy in assuming that offensive associations must be explained by semantic content views of pejoratives. This is precisely what the semantic content view rejects.<sup>39</sup> It does not however reject the possibility that other kinds of theories could help to explain offensive associations with pejoratives (i.e. theories in pragmatics, psychology, sociology, etc.). Because a semantic content view of pejoratives does not explain all of the potential associations with pejorative terms does not mean that the view has failed. It only means that its theoretical domain is limited to concepts and meaning, and does not include the entirety of the perlocutionary effects for such language.

## Conclusion

The Articulation Account, intending to add to the diversity of the analytic space of theories for pejoratives, is undermotivated and under-specified. In the attempt to give the most plausible specification for the Articulation Account, insurmountable problems become immediately apparent. At the same time the negative arguments against content-based views can be dispensed with, and the motivations for content-based views are also immediately apparent. In light of this, the Articulation Account falls short of its aspiration to become the leading contender in the analytic space of pejoratives, and given the above considerations, it is unclear whether it is a contender at all.

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<sup>38</sup> See Hom and May (2025: 641).

<sup>39</sup> See Hom (2010: footnote 5; 2012: 397) and Hom and May (2018: 116ff).

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