Contested Metalinguistic Negotiation

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Abstract. In ordinary conversation, speakers disagree not only about worldly facts, but also about how to use language to describe the world. For example, disagreement about whether Buffalo is in the American Midwest, whether Pluto is a planet, or whether someone has been canceled, can persist even with agreement about all the relevant facts. The speakers may still engage in "metalinguistic negotiation" — disputing what to mean by "Midwest", "planet", or "cancel". I first motivate an approach to metalinguistic negotiation that generalizes a Stalnakerian theory of communication by including linguistic commitments in the conversational common ground. Then, I turn to cases where the very status of a disagreement as metalinguistic or factual is unclear or contested. For example, after the publication of the *New York Times Magazine*'s 1619 Project, some responses claimed to identify factual errors, while others took those same "errors" to be matters of interpretation. I'll consider how to extend our theorizing about metalinguistic negotiation to this type of (even more) "meta" disagreement, using the discussion following the 1619 Project as a case study. On my view, in most such cases, there will be a metalinguistic negotiation going on. Still, I explain several ways in which, despite a dispute being metalinguistic, the factualist side can sometimes receive important vindication. I also discuss why it can make sense for speakers to contest the status of a dispute.

Keywords: disagreement, metalinguistic negotiation, common ground, expressivism, speaker error

Introduction

In **metalinguistic negotiations**, speakers disagree not about worldly facts, but instead about how to use language to describe the world.[1] Consider the following exchange:

> **A:** Buffalo is in the Midwest.
>
> **B:** No, it's not! The Midwest Census Region doesn't include New York.

[1] See, among others, Plunkett & Sundell 2013, Plunkett 2015, Thomasson 2017, Barker 2013, Haslanger 2012.

A: I don't care about that government classification. Buffalo's industrial history and even its dialect make it Midwestern![2]

There is a clear dispute between the speakers here, even assuming they are fully informed about the official U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics determination that the Midwest Census Region excludes New York, and about the cultural and historic ties between Buffalo, NY and clear cases of Midwestern cities like Cincinnati, OH and Indianapolis, IN. The dispute seems not to be about what the world is like, descriptively, but rather about what to mean by "the Midwest" or "Midwestern". And this doesn't need to be an idle dispute. The Midwest is associated with the American "Heartland", and "suggest[s] a simpler, more agrarian, and often more virtuous place than whatever else the Midwest is being compared to" (Montgomery, 2019). Someone from Buffalo may understandably feel invested in their hometown counting as Midwestern, regardless of what the BLS says. Someone else may, also understandably, take these considerations to be too vague and subjective, and think that nothing is gained by departing from the official classification.[3]

For a second example, imagine the following dialogue taking place shortly after the International Astronomical Union redefined "planet" in 2006.

A: Pluto is a planet.

B: No it's not, the IAU's definition requires planets to clear their orbital neighborhood, but Pluto doesn't.

A: I don't accept the IAU's definition! Pluto is a planet.

There is a sensible dispute between A and B here, even assuming both speakers are fully informed about Pluto's physical characteristics and about the IAU's decision. Their dispute seems not to be about what the world is like, but about what to mean by "planet".

[2]Geographer Scott Drzyzga made this case on Twitter, and 40% of respondents to a 2019 CityLab survey counted Buffalo as part of the Midwest (Montgomery, 2019).

[3]Plunkett & Sundell (2021a) discuss a variety of possible circumstances in which speakers might engage in a metalinguistic dispute over what to count as "the Midwest".

Here is a final example of a metalinguistic negotiation:

A: Comedian X was canceled.

B: No, he wasn't, he has a new special out on Netflix right now.

A: He barely worked for years after the scandal broke. He was canceled.

Again, this dispute makes sense, even if we assume that both speakers are in full agreement about the facts on the ground: what the scandals surrounding the comedian were, how they were publicized, what effect they had on his career, etc. Still, the speakers can dispute whether what happened to comedian X should count as his being "canceled".

Sometimes, disputes similar to these may seem pointless. They may seem like they're based on a misunderstanding, and that the speakers are "talking past" each other, engaged in a "merely verbal" dispute. I do not deny that merely verbal disputes sometimes take place. However, metalinguistic negotiations are a different phenomenon. In metalinguistic negotiations, speakers genuinely disagree about something despite meaning different things by some of their terms. One way to see this is that their dispute persists even once they are aware of what the other means (Thomasson, 2017, 12). By contrast, with merely verbal disputes, the conflict disappears once the difference in meaning is revealed.[4]

Metalinguistic negotiations present a challenge for traditional models of communication in terms of information sharing. In Part 1, I will motivate an approach to metalinguistic negotiation, using a **semantic expressivist framework**, which involves generalizing a Stalnakerian theory of communication to include linguistic commitments in the conversational common ground.

My interest in this paper is not only in metalinguistic negotiations where the speakers recognize that they are disputing what to mean by some term. In the disputes over what

[4]See, e.g., Jenkins 2014, Vermeulen 2018 on merely verbal disputes in this sense. This notion of "merely verbal" contrasts with one according to which verbal disputes can be more substantive, and hence closer to metalinguistic negotiations on my understanding; see e.g., Chalmers 2011, Balcerak Jackson 2014, Belleri 2018, Abreu Zavaleta 2021, Knoll 2023, Kocurek 2023.

is in the Midwest, for example, the parties seem to recognize this is what's going on. The proliferation of surveys on the matter (e.g., Hickey 2014, Montgomery 2019), at the least, suggest that few take the determination of the Bureau of Labor Statistics to be definitive. I am particularly concerned with what I'll call **contested metalinguistic negotiation**. In such cases, speakers disagree about *whether* they are engaged in a metalinguistic or factual dispute. A case study in this sort of (even more) "meta" dispute arose in public discourse in the United States following the publication of the *New York Times Magazine*'s 1619 Project in 2019. This project, whose title recognizes the year enslaved Africans were first brought to British North America, is a collection of essays and other materials that places slavery at the center of U.S. history.

Reception of the project varied widely. I'm interested here in the critical response to the 1619 Project from a group of historians who wrote a letter to the editor of the *Times Magazine* (Bynum, McPherson, Oakes, Wilentz, & Wood, 2019). They claimed to be in support of the project overall; they did not dispute the importance of uncovering the continued pernicious legacy of slavery in American life. However, they raised serious criticisms, and demanded corrections of several claims in the project, especially from the introductory essay by Nikole Hannah-Jones. The following exchange brings out one of Hannah-Jones's claims that became a focus for debate.

> **Nikole Hannah-Jones, in the *New York Times Magazine*'s 1619 Project:** "One of the primary reasons the colonists declared their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery" (Hannah-Jones, 2019).
>
> **A critical group of historians (paraphrased):** No, many colonists were opposed to slavery (Bynum et al., 2019).

Those engaged in this dispute had different views about its status as metalinguistic or factual. In their letter to the editor of the magazine, the critics wrote: "these errors . . . cannot be described as interpretation or 'framing.' They are matters of verifiable fact" (Bynum et

al. 2019; see also Wilentz 2020). Hannah-Jones, as well as the magazine's editor, Jake Silverstein, and other supporters of the 1619 Project did not see it this way (e.g., Silverstein 2019, Hannah-Jones 2021).

We may assume all the parties to this dispute were in agreement about the professed views of the various colonists regarding slavery. But what does it take for one of the "primary reasons" of "the colonists" in declaring independence to be the protection of slavery? How many and which colonists must have this motivation? And what does it mean to even have this motivation? The defenders of the 1619 Project answer these questions in ways such that, given the facts on the ground, the claim made by Hannah-Jones in her essay is defensible. They take the views in the essay, and the project as a whole, to reflect legitimate historical interpretation. Hannah-Jones (2021, xxv) cites scholarly work from historians such as Benjamin Quarles, Annette Gordon-Reed, and Alan Taylor to back this up. Observing the dispute, Adam Serwer commented in *The Atlantic*: "which claims are ideological, and which ones are objective, is not always easy to discern" (Serwer, 2019).

In Part 2, I will examine how semantic expressivism can account for this idea. In cases of contested metalinguistic negotiation, whether the speakers are engaged in a factual or an interpretive dispute is itself unclear and disputed. Some theorists have taken cases similar to this to undermine the analysis of a dispute as a metalinguistic negotiation in the first place. The worry is that to analyze a dispute as a metalinguistic negotiation would involve positing an unacceptable amount of error on the part of speakers about their own conversations.[5] As I'll discuss below, the view I defend does posit a certain amount of speaker error. In most cases of contested metalinguistic negotiation, there will indeed be a metalinguistic negotiation or interpretive dispute going on (I'll use these terms interchangeably), despite one of the parties failing to recognize this. One might also worry that this means the nonfactualist side wins out too easily. On the contrary, though, I'll explain several ways in

[5]See especially Cappelen 2018, 174–175. An aversion to such speaker error is also present in e.g., Schroeter 2012, Schroeter & Schroeter 2014.

which, despite a dispute being metalinguistic, the factualist side can nonetheless receive some important vindication. I'll also discuss various reasons why it can make sense for speakers to contest the status of a dispute.

Part 1: Metalinguistic negotiation

Let's return, now, to cases of simple metalinguistic negotiation, like the exchange about Buffalo that we saw above (now abbreviated).

> **A:** Buffalo is in the Midwest.
>
> **B:** No, it's not! The Midwest Census Region doesn't include New York.
>
> **A:** I don't care about that government classification. Buffalo is in the Midwest!

How should we understand the communicative effects of the assertions made in this exchange? In particular, how should we understand what A is communicating with their final claim: "Buffalo is in the Midwest"? In this section, I begin by reviewing a traditional Stalnakerian theory of communication and showing why it faces challenges answering this question. I start here because this theory is simple and elegant, and provides a helpful starting point for exploring what is needed to account for communication in metalinguistic negotiations. Then, I will outline a revision to the theory that can do better, by bringing into the picture speakers' commitments not only about what the world is like, facutally, but also about how to interpret their language.[6]

1.1 Stalnaker's theory of communication

On Stalnaker's theory, communication is essentially information sharing (e.g., Stalnaker 1999). Speakers engaged in conversation share a **common ground**, or set of assumptions known to be shared (at least for the purposes of the conversation). The common ground is represented by a set of worlds: the worlds left open by the assumptions shared by speakers.

[6]This discussion builds on earlier work, including Mena 2022, Kocurek, Jerzak, & Rudolph 2020, Rudolph 2021, Barker 2013, 2002, Plunkett & Sundell 2013, MacFarlane 2016.

The contents of assertions are also represented by sets of worlds: the worlds where the assertion is true. The effect of an accepted assertion in a conversation is to intersect the common ground with the content of the assertion, ruling out all worlds where the assertion is false. Overall, as speakers contribute to the conversation, the possibilities for how the world could be get progressively narrowed down. On this picture, speakers disagree when updating the common ground with both of their assertions rules out all possibilities.

While Stalnaker's picture can nicely capture many instances of communication, it faces a challenge from metalinguistic negotiation. The basic problem is that, going into the conversation, the speakers in a metalinguistic negotiation can already be assumed to take all relevant factual matters to be common ground. The speakers A and B in the exchange about Buffalo, for example, can already have as common ground all the relevant descriptive facts about Buffalo: its geographical location, culture, history, dialect, etc. They can also have as common ground the facts about the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the definition that it has adopted, as well as the extent to which this definition is accepted among the broader linguistic community. Furthermore, A and B can be assumed to be fully aware of each others' preferences regarding how to define "the Midwest". None of these matters are up for dispute. It seems that there aren't any *worlds* that one of the speakers thinks are possible that the other rules out. And yet, intuitively, *something* is disputed here. A picture of content and common ground where these are represented by sets of worlds is ill-equipped to identify what this is.

A natural thought at this point might be that A and B simply disagree about *whether Buffalo is in the Midwest*. This is certainly correct. The issue, however, is whether Stalnaker's theory of communication as information sharing can tell a good story about what this disagreement consists in. As we go through the various factual matters that could be relevant — descriptive facts about Buffalo, linguistic practices with the term "Midwest", people's preferences about how to use this label, etc. — we see that all of these things can be

common ground, while a sensible disagreement can yet persist. The disagreement is about what to mean by "the Midwest"; and this disagreement does not have to reduce to any factual disagreement about what the world is like.

Note that a disagreement over what to mean by "the Midwest" *may* in some cases reduce to a factual disagreement. For instance, switching the context slightly, we can imagine a case where both speakers intend to adopt the definition of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, but A mistakenly believes that this definition admits western New York in the Midwest, while B correctly understands that it does not. In this sort of case, the speakers in a sense disagree about what to mean by "the Midwest" since one thinks this meaning includes Buffalo and the other doesn't. However, this disagreement is entirely due to disagreement over a factual matter (the BLS's classification) that each speaker takes to be relevant to fixing the meaning.[7] The key thing at this point is just that *not all* cases of metalinguistic negotiation are like this. It's not always the case that the interpretive disagreement reduces to a factual one.

One may also ask whether Stalnaker's own two-dimensional framework (e.g., Stalnaker 1978) could suffice to account for metalinguistic negotiation. On this approach, sentences are evaluated relative to two worlds: the world considered as actual, which determines the content of the assertion, and the world of evaluation, which determines whether that content is true. Often, speakers know enough about the actual world to converge on the meanings of terms used in their conversations, and these meanings determine the contents of their assertions. If someone says "I am hungry", those in the conversation generally know who the referent of "I" is, and thus who is being said to be hungry. But sometimes, the meaning of a term may vary with different open possibilities for what the world is like. If someone is shouting from another room and we don't recognize the voice, the assertion still has content; but that content isn't that some particular person is hungry. Instead, its content is the "diagonal" proposition: the proposition that the referent of "I" (whoever that is) is hungry.

[7] See Kocurek 2023 on disagreement in interpretation vs disagreement in semantic plan.

This proposition is still a possible worlds proposition, true if and only if the speaker in the context is hungry.

The key point is that diagonalization allows us to characterize the content of an assertion even when speakers have not converged on meanings. In the indexical example, they haven't converged on the meaning (in the sense of referent) of "I". In our original example of metalinguistic negotiation, they haven't converged on the meaning of "Midwest". So maybe what they communicate in the metalinguistic negotiation is the diagonal proposition, namely, that the referent of "Buffalo" is in the extension of "in the Midwest".

The problem, though, is this proposition is still a possible worlds proposition. So to adopt a diagonalization account involves assuming that the world fixes the meaning of "the Midwest". But this assumption is dubious. It's not clear that a context of utterance is sufficient to determine a single "correct" interpretation.[8] For instance, it is mysterious what we could imagine our speakers A and B discovering about the world that would make them agree that one of them is correct about Buffalo being in the Midwest. Instead, they are engaged in a *normative* dispute about what we *should* mean by "the Midwest". Capturing what's going on in cases of metalinguistic negotiation requires us to draw a distinction between disagreements based in different factual commitments, and disagreements based in different normative views about how to use language. Stalnaker's theory, in representing all content in terms of worlds, doesn't allow us to do this.

There may be further ways to try rehabilitate the Stalnakerian theory to account for cases of metalinguistic negotiation. I do not claim to rule out all options here. But I take it that there are enough serious challenges to justify developing an alternative, and that is what I turn to next.

[8]For related discussion about communication with vague language, see MacFarlane 2020, 1.6.

1.2 Semantic expressivism

To describe metalinguistic negotiations, we propose to enrich Stalnaker's theory so that speakers communicate not only information about the world, but also *proposals for how to use language*. We thus take the common ground and contents of assertions no longer to be represented by sets of worlds, but sets of **world-interpretation pairs**, where an interpretation is a function from linguistic terms to meanings. Thus, in the dialogue above, the content of A's assertion of "Buffalo is in the Midwest" is the set of world-interpretation pairs according to which Buffalo is in the extension of "in the Midwest" according to that interpretation at that world. Assuming that the facts about Buffalo, the government's definition, and so on, are all common ground, the intended effect of A's assertion is not to contribute any new factual information: it's not to rule out any worlds from the common ground. Instead, the intended effect is to rule out certain interpretations, namely, ones on which Buffalo fails to count as being in "the Midwest". In their metalinguistic negotiation, then, A and B do have a genuine disagreement. But this is not because they can't come to a shared view about what the world is like, but rather because they can't come to a shared view about how to carve up that world between what is in "the Midwest" and what is not. Overall, enriching Stalnaker's theory by replacing worlds with world-interpretation pairs allows us to make sense of metalinguistic negotiations as disputes about linguistic choices.[9]

[9]There are alternative accounts of apparent metalinguistic negotiations. An anonymous referee suggests an account that appeals to "dual character concepts" in the sense of Knobe, Prasada, & Newman 2013, where "the Midwest", for example, can refer to either a descriptive concept or a normative one. This idea is worth exploring further, and may be part of the explanation for some metalinguistic negotiations. However, it doesn't clearly extend to the cases I will discuss in Part 2, where the disputes do not hinge on a single term that plausibly has both normative and descriptive meanings. There are also Gricean accounts, from, e.g., Belleri (2017), Mankowitz (2021). For considerations against these, and in support of incorporating interpretations into the theory of content as I do here, see, e.g., Kocurek et al. 2020, Einheuser 2006 on "counterconventional" conditionals, and Muñoz 2019, chap. 6 on semantic underdetermination. The semantic expressivist account advanced here also bears some similarity with the kind of semantic relativism that has been adopted for predicates or personal taste, epistemic modals and other terms (Kölbel, 2004, Lasersohn, 2005, Egan, 2007, 2010, MacFarlane, 2014). Instead of taking the contents of assertions to be world-interpretation pairs, we could instead take the contents to be sets of worlds, but which set of worlds that is will vary with an interpretation parameter that is set by the context of assessment. It is tricky to choose between expressivism and relativism (Beddor, 2019), and it is also worth considering combinations of these approaches, as has been done for PPTs by, e.g., Beršky tė & Stevens (2023). Many of the lessons I draw

This outlook is part of a broad picture we call **semantic expressivism**, which involves theses about both mind and language (Kocurek et al., 2020, Rudolph, 2021). On this view, speakers' mental states are not exhausted by their factual commitments, but also include commitments about how to use language.[10] Correspondingly, assertions express constraints on the space of possibilities of worlds and linguistic interpretations jointly. Whether a given (accepted) assertion rules out worlds or interpretations or both depends on the common ground of the conversation.[11]

This has the implication that the distinction between "matters of fact" and "matters of interpretation" is not one that can be made at level of sentences. One might want to ask: Is the claim "Buffalo is in the Midwest" stating a fact or a matter of interpretation? On the present view, this question cannot be answered without information about the context of assertion. With a common ground that leaves open interpretations on which Buffalo both is and isn't in the Midwest, then it is a matter of interpretation. This is the kind of common ground we were imagining for the case. But with a common ground on which all open interpretations count Buffalo as outside the Midwest, then it would be a fact that Buffalo isn't Midwestern. It's because no plausible interpretations count, say, New York City, as part of the Midwest that this seems to be clearly *factually* wrong.[12] I will return to this idea

about contested metalinguistic negotiation in Part 2 could be preserved in some form on these alternative approaches.

[10]I use "commitment" as a neutral term for mental states that can concern facts or matters of interpretation. Factual commitments are not identical to beliefs, as a speaker may have factual commitments for the purposes of a conversation that come apart from their beliefs (perhaps, for the sake of argument, they have accepted something they don't believe) (e.g., Stalnaker 2002 on what he calls "presupposition"). Still, a speaker's factual commitments will generally line up with their beliefs, and nothing in my discussion hangs on cases where they differ. While commitments are mental states, speakers express those commitments in conversation and thereby open themselves up to dispute with others who hold conflicting commitments.

[11]In Rudolph & Kocurek 2020, Kocurek & Rudolph 2023 we argue that a further revision to the present semantic expressivist picture is needed in order to capture communication with what we call "metalinguistic gradable" constructions, such as "Pluto is more an asteroid than a planet". We argue that such cases support replacing interpretations with semantic orderings, i.e., rankings of interpretations. This revision, however, still allows us to hold onto the present ideas regarding non-gradable sentences, and so I stick with the simpler picture for the current paper.

[12]See related discussion in Kennedy & Willer 2016, 2022. In a minimal sense, we might want to always think about Buffalo being in Midwest as a (potential) "fact". As Gibbard (2003, 18) puts it in discussion of metaethical expressivism, there's a sense in which "p is a fact" is interchangeable with "p". But, at the

below, in section 2.4, when discussing reasons why the status of a dispute can be unclear and contested.

Interpretive commitments are normative in a way that factual commitments are not. While there are ways to evaluate interpretive choices (some of which I will discuss in section 2.2), they are not judged "true" or "false" based on how the world is. That is not their direction of fit. Often, speakers adopt interpretations because of evaluative considerations. As mentioned above, someone from Buffalo may choose to count their hometown as Midwestern because of its culture, and because they have positive associations with that culture that they believe deserve to be highlighted. If someone else rejects that interpretation, this is taken as a rejection of that way of thinking about the city. So while a metalinguistic negotiation is a dispute over interpretation, it very often also a dispute about more than that: it is, indirectly, about all the factors that underlie speakers' commitments to those interpretations.

Let me make two further notes of clarification about semantic expressivism. First, this is not an expressivist semantics about a particular area of discourse or class of terms. For instance, it is not analogous to a claim like: "might" statements express features of speakers' information states. Rather, it is the view that assertions *in general* express the semantic commitments of speakers. One can give a label to assertions whose purpose in conversation is to rule out interpretive options. (For instance, they are similar to "sharpening" uses of vague adjectives in Barker 2002.) But such assertions cannot be demarcated by the vocabulary they make use of. Any vocabulary can be such that its interpretation is unsettled or disputed. Instead, they are demarcated by the conversational context in which they take place.

Second, semantic expressivism does not take assertions to be *about* language. On the view endorsed here, "Buffalo is in the Midwest" is not equivalent to something like "I adopt an interpretation on which the referent of 'Buffalo' is in the extension of 'in the Midwest'".

theoretical level, it is important to distinguish between facts in this minimal sense, and facts as things that are settled by the world parameter in our theory of content.

Assertions express speakers' linguistic commitments in the same way they express speakers' factual ones. They are not equivalent to statements about such commitments.

Part 2: Contested metalinguistic negotiation

Let's turn next to cases of **contested metalinguistic negotiation**, where the status of a dispute as interpretive or factual is itself up for dispute. Such a "meta" dispute arose following the publication of the *New York Times Magazine*'s 1619 Project. Here is a (partly imagined) exchange jumping off from one of the claims in Hannah-Jones's opening essay, also mentioned in the introduction.[13]

> **1619 Project:** "One of the primary reasons the colonists declared their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery."
>
> **Critics:** No, many colonists were opposed to slavery.
>
> **Defender:** Sure, but that doesn't change the fact than an important motivator for many colonists was preserving slavery.

The key feature of the case is that the critics took Hannah-Jones's original claim to be refuted by factual considerations. The defenders of the project, instead, hold that it's a matter of interpretation how many and which colonists have to have some motive for the claim about

[13]The initial claim is a direct quote from the original version of the essay (Hannah-Jones, 2019). The rejoinder from critics is not a direct quote, but is based on arguments made by a group of historians in a letter to editor of the *Times Magazine* (Bynum et al. 2019; also Wilentz 2020). The final claim from a defender is an imagined continuation based on the kinds of defenses of the original claim that have been offered. For instance, Silverstein (2019, 4–5) in his response to the historians' letter to the editor writes:

> The work of various historians, among them David Waldstreicher and Alfred W. and Ruth G. Blumrosen, supports the contention that uneasiness among slaveholders in the colonies about growing antislavery sentiment in Britain and increasing imperial regulation helped motivate the Revolution. . . . As Waldstreicher writes, "The black-British alliance decisively pushed planters in these [Southern] states toward independence."

"the colonists" to be true.[14,15]

The colonists' motives in declaring independence was not the only focus of contested metalinguistic negotiation following the publication of the 1619 Project. Another debated claim was about the extent to which Black Americans were aided by people of other races in their struggle for freedom and equality.

> **1619 Project:** "For the most part, Black Americans fought back alone [against racial injustice]" (Hannah-Jones, 2019, 15).
>
> **Sean Wilentz:** "Before, during, and after the Civil War, some white people were always an integral part of the fight for racial equality" (Wilentz, 2020, 12).
>
> **Adam Serwer:** "Looking back to the long stretches of night before the light of dawn broke — the centuries of slavery and the century of Jim Crow that followed — 'largely alone' seems more than defensible. ... The millions who continued to labor in bondage until 1865 struggled, survived, and resisted far from the welcoming arms of northern abolitionists" (Serwer, 2019, 8).

In this dispute, Wilentz points to white involvement in the fight for racial equality as a fact that refutes Hannah-Jones's claim (see also Mackaman 2019b). Serwer, defending her, brings out that there is a choice about what counts as "for the most part ... alone" or "largely alone". He takes the facts on the ground not to close off the appropriateness of Hannah-Jones's statement. Again, we have a case of contested metalinguistic negotiation. What one party defends as a legitimate interpretive choice is viewed by another as factually

[14]This is a definite plural, which is known to give rise to "non-maximality" and "homogeneity" effects. Non-maximality means that exceptions are allowed, and homogeneity means that the group is assumed to be mostly the same with respect to the property in question (Križ, 2016, 2019). In these respects, sentences with definite plurals are similar to generics, whose interpretation is notoriously variable and complex. Possibilities for metalinguistic negotiation over generics are discussed in Plunkett, Sterken, & Sundell 2023, and it is plausible that similar sorts of disagreement can also arise over sentences with definite plural subjects.

[15]There are potentially further interpretive issues relevant for assessing Hannah-Jones's claim, including what it means for people to have a certain motive. Several historians who objected to her claim hold that the Revolution ended up undermining slavery (Mackaman, 2019a,b, Harris, 2020). Is this relevant for assessing the motives going into the war? For my purposes, it's not critical what exactly the interpretive dispute is, but just that there is one, at least according to the project's defenders.

incorrect.[16,17]

2.1 Contested metalinguistic negotiation and semantic expressivism

Can semantic expressivism account for such cases of contested metalinguistic negotiation? According to the view, it seems that the side that thinks the dispute is interpretive will almost always be right. Recall that the common ground is the set of world-interpretation pairs left open by the speakers' factual and linguistic commitments. Given this, as soon as one speaker leaves a certain interpretation open, it will be left open in the common ground. So, if the truth of a claim depends on that interpretation choice, disputing that claim will have to involve disagreeing about the appropriateness of that interpretation.

This assumes that the side that takes the dispute to be metalinguistic is right that they leave open an interpretation on which their claim comes out true, and that the other side leaves open an interpretation on which it comes out false. If we allow for failures of introspection regarding one's own interpretive commitments, then the "nonfactualist" side (i.e., the side that takes the dispute to be a metalinguistic negotiation) may be wrong in

[16] Are these disputes perhaps merely verbal, with the parties talking past each other due to misunderstanding? While possible, I do not think this is the most charitable way to understand them. Hannah-Jones can know that her critics employ a meaning of "largely alone" according to which it's false that Black Americans struggled largely alone. Still, she objects to their view because she thinks this is not the right interpretation to adopt. There is a normative dispute about what we *should* mean by "largely alone". Knowing what the other means by the phrase does not dissolve that dispute. Thus the dispute is not "merely verbal" in the sense mentioned in the introduction. Some (apparent) metalinguistic negotiations might be, but we should have something to say about cases — like the ones I am discussing here — where more seems to be going on. Note also that this example involves a vague term. I do not take that to rule out metalinguistic negotiation, as such disputes can also concern what standard to employ for a vague term (Barker, 2013, Sundell, 2011, Plunkett & Sundell, 2013). For my purposes, I will take these standards also to be settled by the interpretation parameter.

[17] One feature of the 1619 Project disputes is that they took place mostly in writing and not in spoken conversation, whereas most examples of metalinguistic negotiation in the literature are imagined as spoken. However, I take this to be an inessential feature. Indeed, a lot of the metalinguistic negotiations that matter, especially in public life, are carried out largely in writing. An anonymous reviewer notes that a merely verbal dispute might be harder to detect in writing, without the non-linguistic cues that might help clear up misunderstandings in oral conversation. While this seems plausible for some cases, I think it is unlikely to dissolve the problems with the 1619 Project disputes, given how much back-and-forth there has been. There are further tricky issues with disputes carried out in public and in writing, including how to determine the participants and the common ground. My discussion here necessarily involves some idealization, just like most philosophical discussions in these areas. Still, I think it's worthwhile to grapple with a naturally occurring case. By seeing where the challenges arise, and where the idealizations are needed, we better understand how our theories remain incomplete.

such cases. I will set aside this possibility when it comes to the 1619 Project disputes, as it seems like all parties are clear-eyed about the interpretations that are adopted and what verdicts those interpretations yield about the claims in question. (Of course, given that I am not fully aware of the mental states of the speakers involved, this assumption may be mistaken. Since I am mainly interested in exploring possibilities for contested metalinguistic negotiation, I'll set this aside.)

To illustrate, let me flesh out the second case so that the nonfactualist side is correct about the status of the dispute. Assume that Wilentz, Hannah-Jones, Serwer, and so on, don't disagree about the actual level of white involvement in the struggle for racial equality. Assume further that Hannah-Jones, Serwer, and other defenders of the 1619 Project take "for the most part alone" to be interpreted in such a way that this level of white involvement makes it true that "Black Americans struggled for the most part alone". Finally, assume that Wilentz adopts a more stringent definition of "for the most part alone". If this is the situation, then Wilentz would not be correct to hold that his disagreement with the 1619 Project is solely over a "matter of facts". He takes the facts, together with his preferred interpretation, to make the claim about "for the most part" false. But a resolution to the dispute does not depend solely on recognition of those facts, but rather on a decision about how to interpret the relevant vocabulary.

Now, in the debate as it actually played out, it's possible that there was not total factual agreement about the level of white involvement. If the level of white involvement assumed by Hannah-Jones, etc. is lower than that assumed by Wilentz, and if the level assumed by Wilentz is such that, were she to come to recognize it, she would change her claim about Black people struggling "for the most part alone" — in this case, their dispute would be a factual one. But Serwer's response on behalf of the 1619 Project doesn't read as if it's attempting to correct the critics about how much or how little white involvement there was. Rather, it reads as a defense of taking the already-mutually-recognized level of involvement

to still fall short of refuting Hannah-Jones's claim. If that's the right way to view the dispute in question, then the nonfactualist is correct about the status of the dispute: the dispute is not purely factual, but at least partly over a matter of interpretation. When the critics hold that their dispute hinges on "matters of verifiable fact", they are mistaken.[18] (I will return in a moment to the implication of my view that some speakers are in error about their dispute.)

This might be the right assessment when it comes to the 1619 Project disputes we've looked at. At least some of the flash points for debate following its publication seemed not to arise because the different parties disagreed factually about historical events. Rather, they looked at the same events and made different choices about how those events ought to be described. This has to do with language, but is not *merely* a matter of language (McConnell-Ginet, 2008, Plunkett & Sundell, 2021a). Framing of historical events has great importance for a country. The choices to raise the bar for white involvement in racial struggles, or to count preserving slavery as a "main motive of the colonists", might have moral or political arguments on either side, given various goals for shaping a public sense of history, fostering communal projects going forward, and so on.[19] As emphasized above, interpretive

[18]Support for the dispute over the colonists' main motives not being purely factual can even be found in the words of Gordon Wood, one of the historians who signed the letter to the editor. In an interview, he holds:

> It's been argued by some historians, people other than Hannah-Jones, that some planters in colonial Virginia were worried about what the British might do about slavery. Certainly, Dunmore's proclamation in 1775, which promised the slaves freedom if they joined the Crown's cause, provoked many hesitant Virginia planters to become patriots. There may have been individuals who were worried about their slaves in 1776, but to see the whole revolution in those terms is to miss the complexity. (Mackaman, 2019a)

Here, Wood seems to concede the facts, but to object to the focus on those who were motivated to preserve slavery, rather than those with other motives. For discussion of disagreement about what to focus on or attend to, see Stroud 2019.

[19]In this connection, historian Leslie M. Harris has an interesting perspective on the 1619 Project. When she was consulted as a fact-checker on the project, she objected to the claim that the preservation of slavery was a main motive for the American Revolution. However, she is still critical of the historians who penned the letter to the editor, demanding corrections. She takes the overall perspective of the 1619 Project, focusing on the importance of slavery in shaping the United States, to be an important one, and one neglected in the scholarly work of at least two of the prominent historians who signed the letter. She writes:

> It is easy to correct facts; it is much harder to correct a worldview that consistently ignores and distorts the role of African Americans and race in our history in order to present white

commitments are normative: they are about how language should be used. Often, people are committed to certain interpretations because they believe those interpretations will serve broader social or moral aims.

One might worry that the present view makes it too easy for the nonfactualist side to win out in cases of contested metalinguistic negotiation. To be clear, to say that the nonfactualist side "wins out", simply means that they are right about the *status* of the dispute as interpretive. As I'll discuss more shortly, this doesn't mean that they are right about everything. Indeed, there are several ways for the nonfactualist to be legitimately criticized in many cases of contested metalinguistic negotiation, even if they are on the right side of the "meta" dispute.

The reason the nonfactualist side easily wins out on the status of the dispute is that, on the present picture, one side can in a sense unilaterally force certain interpretations to be left open. To sharpen the worry here, let me present two fictional examples of contested metalinguistic negotiation. The first is admittedly somewhat absurd; but still, I hope, useful.

> **A:** Broccoli is a fruit.
>
> **B:** No, that's obviously false; broccoli doesn't contain seeds.
>
> **A:** Oh I know, but I disagree with that way of categorizing fruits.

Before hearing A's final response, it seems natural to think that the fact that B pointed out simply refutes A's claim that broccoli is a fruit. And indeed, even if A adopts a very odd interpretation of "fruit", one might still have the feeling that whether broccoli is a fruit should remain a factual question.

> people as all powerful and solely in possession to the keys of equality, freedom and democracy. At least that is the corrective history toward which the 1619 Project is moving, if imperfectly. (Harris, 2020)

I think that there is an interpretive, and not merely factual, dispute between Harris and Hannah-Jones. (And we might appeal to some of the factors I'll mention below to evaluate which interpretation is better.) Still, we can take Harris's point, in the present framework, to be that one doesn't need to (or perhaps should not) accept Hannah-Jones's interpretation of terms in order to take the corrective view of American history that the 1619 Project is — rightly, in Harris's view — adopting.

Here is a second, and somewhat weightier example.

A: Sam isn't an eligible voter.

B: Yes, she is. She's an adult U.S. citizen.

A: I know, but I think only land owners are eligible voters.

B: Land owning has nothing to do with voter eligibility!

A: I know I disagree with the law on this. But I simply don't consider someone an eligible voter if they don't own land.

Again, it might seem like B's factual claims here simply refute A's statement. A's adoption of a peculiar and regressive view about what to mean by "eligible voter" doesn't seem to make the issue here nonfactual.

Negative reactions to A's surprising claims, both about broccoli and about voter eligibility, come from an understandable place. The claims are, on their face, absurd. I wish now to explain how the semantic expressivist picture can capture the sense in which A's claims are absurd, while, however, still taking A to be right about the status of the dispute. In other words, I hold that these cases can be metalinguistic negotiations — with B being wrong that their factual assertions simply refute A's position. Nonetheless, the initial reaction siding with B is vindicated by other mistakes that A makes, not about the status of the dispute, but about other matters.

If A and B in these disputes are really in agreement about all the relevant facts — whether broccoli has seeds, what the laws surrounding voting are, etc. — then they are in these cases engaged in metalinguistic or interpretive disputes, as A believes. In this sense, the nonfactualist wins out on the question of the status of their dispute. After all, resolving the disputes would require at least one party to revise their interpretive commitments. However, as I mentioned, there can still be important ways in which the factualist can be getting things right. And this can explain our initial dismissive reaction of the nonfactualist's position.

I will discuss two such ways. First, the factualist can be right to reject their interlocutor's interpretive choice; second, in some cases, the speakers intend to adopt interpretations that have some factual property.

Before turning to that, however, I would like to pause to acknowledge that my account does involve attributing to some speakers a lack of awareness of what their disagreement ultimately consists in. Some, like Cappelen (2018), take this to be an objection to analyses of disputes as metalinguistic negotiations, in cases where *both* speakers resist the idea that they are engaged in that kind of dispute. Even in cases like that, it may be theoretically defensible to posit error all around about the nature of the dispute. After all, speakers may not always be clear-eyed about what lies behind all their disputes (Plunkett & Sundell, 2021b, Belleri, 2020, Thomasson, 2017). But even if one is skeptical about that level of speaker error,[20] contested metalinguistic negotiation makes a more limited kind of speaker error theoretically acceptable, even unavoidable. For in cases of contested metalinguistic negotiation, we have no choice but to attribute error to at least one of the parties to the dispute. After all, one party thinks they are engaged in a factual dispute, while the other party thinks they are engaged in an interpretive dispute. They can't both be correct.[21]

2.2 Evaluating interpretations

In cases of contested metalinguistic negotiation, with the nonfactualist right about the status of the dispute, the factualist can still be right to reject the nonfactualist's claim, and their choice of interpretation that lies behind it. We can distinguish four prevalent reasons why interpretations can be criticizable. I do not claim these to be exhaustive; and each can be outweighed by competing reasons in certain cases. But, together, they help explain our sense of sympathy with the factualist side in the previous two examples.

[20] And see Abreu 2023 for a new version of the speaker error objection.

[21] I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to further explore the connections between my view and speaker error issues.

Prevalent usage First, interpretations can be criticized for wildly diverging from prevalent usage. This is likely a large part of our reason for balking at A's claims in the previous exchanges. Interpretations that count broccoli in the extension of "fruit" or that fail to count adult U.S. citizens as "eligible voters" are serious and blatant departures from prevalent accepted usage in the broad linguistic community.

Importantly, divergence from prevalent usage isn't always a good reason to reject an interpretation. For example, consider activists in the 19th and 20th centuries advocating for a broadening of the definition of "rape". These activists asserted things like: "Forced sexual contact of a wife by her husband is rape". This usage went against widely accepted interpretations, as well as law, at the time (McConnell-Ginet, 2020, chap. 6). But the activists would rightly be unmoved by someone who rejected their claim on that basis.[22]

Another example where prevalent usage is rejected came up when astronomers redefined "planet" in a way that excluded Pluto. Those making this decision took there to be good scientific reason for restricting the definition, even though they recognized that it would involve a major, and controversial, change from how the linguistic community currently spoke.

This is all to say that prevalent usage is clearly not the final word in decision-making about what interpretations to adopt or advocate for. Still, barring good reason to deviate from widely accepted interpretations, such deviation is often a fair reason for criticism. In the two dialogues we saw earlier, A's blatant departure from prevalent usage, with seemingly no good reason on the other side, makes us understandably side with B in their dismissal of A's statements.

Moral considerations A second reason why interpretations can be criticized is for enabling or making it harder to identify moral harms. This is also likely part of our reason for

[22]Compare Sterken 2019 on "transformative communicative disruptions". Speakers also sometimes advocate for conceptual or interpretive choices even when they know they are unlikely to convince their interlocutors to adopt them. This is discussed by Hansen (2021) under the label of "metalinguistic provocations".

rejecting A's claim of, "Sam isn't an eligible voter" above. Not only does A's interpretation go against prevalent usage, but it is socially regressive and morally objectionable. Moral and political considerations were also clearly behind activists' push to redefine "rape" in the 20th century to include marital rape. The previous definition, they held, enabled moral harms by making it legally difficult if not impossible to punish, or even recognize, sexual violence within a marriage.[23]

Scientific naturalness Third, interpretations can be evaluated on grounds of scientific naturalness. As mentioned above, this played a major role in the change in definition of "planet" adopted by the International Astronomical Union in 2006. The consensus was that any scientifically respectable definition would either have to exclude Pluto, or let in many more planets (other trans-Neptunian objects, like Pluto, that have recently been discovered, and likely more to come). Scientific naturalness didn't definitively settle matters in favor of the former choice, but it did speak against the pre-2006 nine planet status quo.

A lack of scientific naturalness likely also plays a role in our dismissal of A's interpretation of "fruit" in the example above. Still, in that case, it seems like scientific considerations as well as prevalent usage are both relevant. While we would likely react about as negatively to the claim that strawberries are vegetables as we do to the claim that broccoli is a fruit, we obviously don't have the same extreme reaction to the claim that tomatoes are vegetables. A definition of "vegetable" based on culinary or gustatory considerations is a viable alternative, in many contexts, to a definition based on biological properties. Scientific considerations, like the others we've mentioned, can be outweighed by other factors. Still, in many contexts, speakers prefer interpretations that "carve nature at the joints" and reasonably criticize ones

[23]Harms that are due to prevalent interpretive or conceptual practices are often cases of "hermenutical injustice": "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experiences obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (Fricker 2007, 155; see also McKinnon 2016). As Maitra (2018, 353) discusses, one way to remedy such injustice is "to assimilate [the experience] to another whose relevant normative properties are already sufficiently familiar." A main example Maitra uses is statutory rape, and similar ideas apply to marital rape as well.

that fail to do so in obvious ways.[24]

Why is the interpretation adopted? A final reason for criticizing interpretations is if they are adopted in bad faith, say for biased reasons that one wouldn't endorse in another setting. An interesting instance of this sort of criticism came up in the 1619 Project disputes. Gordon Wood, one of the historians who signed the letter of critique to the *Times Magazine*, also wrote a scholarly review of a book by historian Alan Taylor that made a similar claim about motivations for the American Revolution as Hannah-Jones made in her essay. However, in that review, Wood made no objection on this point. If his insistence on a certain interpretation only came up in the context of a politically-fraught public exchange, one might question his ultimate reasons for adopting it — as *Times Magazine* editor Jake Silverstein seems to imply in a piece situating the critical response to the 1619 Project within wider debates about the framing of U.S. history (Silverstein, 2021, 11). On the other hand, there is also a cost to the magazine if they make retractions or corrections, so motives were likely complex on that side too. As it happens, Hannah-Jones's essay was revised in response to criticism to replace "the colonists" with "some of the colonists". This was not put forward as a correction, but rather a "clarification". As she writes in the preface to the book version of the 1619 Project, this change served "to clarify that this sentence had never been meant to imply that every single colonist shared this motivation" (Hannah-Jones, 2021, xxv).

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of reasons one might criticize interpretations. In general, evaluating interpretations is an instance of normative reasoning and so will often involve weighing many competing considerations (cf. Burgess & Plunkett 2013a,b on concep-

[24]The outlook of this paper is thus compatible with semantic externalism in the following sense. Evidence for externalism comes from Putnam- and Kripke-style thought experiments, where people judge that the reference of a term is determined by external factors, possibly unknown to the speaker. For example, the stuff on Twin Earth is not water — is not in the extension of the English word "water" — because it is not H2O; it doesn't matter that the stuff functions just like water and that no Earthlings or Twin Earthlings (in 1750, say) can tell the difference (Putnam, 1973, Kripke, 1980). To the extent that speakers use the word "water" like this, externalism is true of that word. Nothing about semantic expressivism changes this story. For related discussion of externalism, see Koch 2021, Pinder 2021, De Brabanter & Leclercq 2023.

tual ethics). The key point is that, though the nonfactualist is easily right about the *status* of the disagreement as a metalinguistic negotiation, the person who (mistakenly) thinks that the dispute is factual may adopt the better interpretation of the terms in question — where "better" here is judged based on a variety of factors, including the four just described.

2.3 Interpreting conditional on facts

There is another reason that can potentially vindicate the factualist side in some cases of contested metalinguistic negotiation. This is that, sometimes, speakers aim to use interpretations that possess some factual property. For example, someone might want to use the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics's definition of "the Midwest", whatever that is. And in some cases of contested metalinguistic negotiation, both speakers may aim to interpret words conditional on some factual matter, and yet disagree about the relevant facts.

The cases given above were not like this, but we can provide one as follows.

> **A:** Buffalo is in the Midwest.
>
> **B:** No, it's not. Buffalo is in New York!
>
> **A:** I know that, but isn't western New York in the Midwest Census Region?
>
> **B:** Nope, according to the BLS, no part of New York is in the Midwest Census Region.
>
> **A:** Oh, okay, then I agree, Buffalo isn't in the Midwest.

Here, B is a factualist in the sense that they take their dispute with A to be based on factual matters. Is this a situation, then, where the factualist side is right about the status of the dispute?

This kind of case presents a partial vindication of the idea that in contested metalinguistic negotiation, the factualist can be right about the status of the dispute. To see why, consider the question: Do the disputants here adopt the same or different interpretations of "the Midwest"? If interpretations map words to meanings (i.e., intensions), then they adopt

different interpretations. The intension that A associates with "the Midwest" at the start includes Buffalo in its extension at the actual world, whereas that adopted by B does not. So in this sense, A and B are initially engaged in a metalinguistic dispute, which ends when A changes their interpretive commitments to match B's.

However, there's also a fairly intuitive sense in which A and B agree about how to interpret "the Midwest" from the outset in this exchange. This is because they both intend to adopt whatever definition the BLS has adopted (they share a "semantic plan" in the sense of Kocurek 2023). Because A agrees with B that the interpretation of "the Midwest" should depend on what the BLS says, the resolution of their dispute primarily hinges on A learning new factual information. Before we get to A's rejoinders in the examples above in section 2.2, it is perhaps natural to assume that they were intending to use the terms "fruit" and "eligible voter" in the prevalent way. And if that was correct, then the dispute would be resolved through their acceptance of the facts pointed out by B. It seems to me to be a matter of interpretation (!) whether we count that sort of case as one where the factualist or nonfactualist is right.

2.4 Why contest?

Let's now take stock and consider: Given what we've said so far, why would anyone dispute the status of a disagreement? It seems that, as long as the speakers adopt different interpretations of the relevant terms, the nonfactualist is easily right. So is the other side just confused? Earlier, I quoted Adam Serwer commenting on the 1619 Project disputes: "which claims are ideological, and which ones are objective, is not always easy to discern." There seems to be some truth to this observation. In what sense can the present approach acknowledge that?

To see how semantic expressivism can capture the truth in Serwer's claim, recall that on this view, speakers express their commitments to *both facts and interpretations* when they make assertions. Consider, again, A's assertion of "Buffalo is in the Midwest". Without

knowing anything else about A's commitments, we don't know whether she intends to adopt the Bureau of Labor Statistics's interpretation of "Midwest" and is mistaken about the facts, or rejects the BLS's interpretation and is correct about the facts. And someone else, B, might hear A's assertion, know that they disagree, but not know exactly what that disagreement consists in.

In the 1619 Project exchanges, the relevant facts, and how they bear on interpretive choices, are extremely complex. Hannah-Jones, in her opening essay, writes: "One of the primary reasons the colonists declared their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery." In his criticism piece, Wilentz discusses several pieces of factual evidence that he takes to speak against this claim. Going in, we readers don't necessarily know whether any of these would be taken by Hannah-Jones to support revising her claim. We can't simply read off of the claim exactly what factual matters are being taken to settle its truth, given some interpretive commitments. In replies, Hannah-Jones makes clear that she does not take some examples of colonists with diverging motives to refute her claim. But this was not transparent in her statement.[25]

A further reason why the status of a dispute can be unclear within semantic expressivism goes back to the point we saw in section 2.3, about how speakers sometimes intend to adopt an interpretation with some factual property. Whether this is the case, and if so, what the relevant facts are, can also not be read off of speakers' statements. In some cases, there is little difficulty here. For instance, it's probably fairly easy to figure out if someone intends to use "the Midwest" the same way as the BLS. But in other cases, figuring out which facts a speaker's interpretation may be conditional on could take much more work. Thus, this is another reason why disputants can reasonably be unsure about what exactly their disagreement amounts to, on the present picture.

[25] As mentioned above, the essay was revised to replace "the colonists" with "some of the colonists". Still, Hannah-Jones stands by her original claim. However, she acknowledged that "it became clear that if we didn't clarify it in some way, it was going to dog us for eternity" (quoted in Ellison 2020).

There is another reason for contestation, which may be particularly relevant in some of the responses to the 1619 Project. It seems that, in holding some issue to be factual rather than interpretive, someone can, in a sense, communicate that any interpretation on which the relevant facts *wouldn't* settle the question in the way they think it should be settled is beyond the pale and shouldn't even be under consideration. In other words, one might hold that a dispute is factual, not because one thinks it is factual, but rather because one thinks it *ought* to be. On my approach, this still wouldn't make the dispute factual. But it could help make sense of why speakers, in some cases of nonfactual disputes, might find it appropriate to insist that the dispute is over a "matter of facts". (This is perhaps analogous to a parent saying "We don't jump on the bed in our house" while observing their child doing exactly that.)

Conclusion

We began in Part 1 with metalinguistic negotiation, in which speakers dispute what to mean by terms. Semantic expressivism can account for such conversations better than more traditional theories of communication. According to semantic expressivism, speakers' mental states are characterized by interpretive as well as factual commitments. Common ground and contents of assertions are modeled as sets of world-interpretation pairs. With this machinery in place, we capture the communicative effects of assertions made in the context of metalinguistic negotiations: they are proposals to remove certain interpretive choices from the common ground. And in making such assertions, speakers express their normative commitments for how to use language.

We then turned in Part 2 to contested metalinguistic negotiation, where speakers disagree about the status of their dispute as either factual or interpretive. If the speakers in such a case genuinely do adopt competing interpretations, then their dispute will be at least in part a metalinguistic or interpretive one. In this sense, the nonfactualist fairly easily wins out on the question of the status of the dispute. However, this does *not* mean that the

interpretations they adopt are the better ones. We saw several reasons why, in cases of contested metalinguistic negotiation, one may justifiably be sympathetic with the factualist side: not because the dispute is entirely factual, but rather because their dismissal of the other speaker's position is backed up by good reasons. Furthermore, there can still be a sense in which the dispute is "at bottom" factual, if the speakers both intend to adopt an interpretation with some factual property.

Finally, our approach vindicates Serwer's idea that whether something is a matter of interpretation or a matter of fact is not always easy to discern. Speakers' factual and interpretive commitments cannot be read off of the surface of their assertions. Moreover, speakers may sometimes insist that a dispute is factual, not because it actually is purely factual, but rather because they think it ought to be. Overall, it is also my hope that case studies from public discussion, like that surrounding the 1619 Project, can offer a more complete and realistic view of the kinds of metalinguistic disputes speakers engage in.

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