



Explaining *-splain* in digital discourse

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Abstract. Combining digital discourse analysis and Citizen Sociolinguistics, methodological frames that contend with the effects of evolving digital practices, I present an approach to studying sociolinguistic trends by investigating how social media users talk about what language is doing.

This approach is applicable to research on a wide range of linguistic and cultural contexts. The particular focus in this paper, however, is on U.S.-based social issues and linguistic features of American English as they appear in pieces of digital discourse from the micro-blogging platforms Twitter and Tumblr. Situated within the highly fractured sociopolitical climate of the pandemic-afflicted United States, the language under discussion provides a glimpse of some historically relevant sociocultural beliefs and attitudes towards the role of gender and racial identity in sociopolitical discourse. Focusing on uses of *-splain*, a metapragmatic bound morpheme, the paper demonstrates how social media users assemble lexical, discursive, and other semiotic resources as means for negotiating sociopragmatic appropriateness. The analysis shows how the usage of words like *mansplain* encompass the sociolinguistic process of enregisterment through practices of linguistic reflexivity, creativity, and regimentation – practices that are essential aspects of interaction and participation in social media. Using these enregistered metapragmatic words problematizes imbalances in users' sociopragmatic ideologies, namely who can or cannot say what, to whom, and in what manner. I show how creative metapragmatic language is deployed to discuss issues of entitlement and epistemic authority in communicative dynamics. I draw on theoretical frames that reveal how the recontextualization and resemiotization of *-splain* words and other metapragmatic neologisms are performances of identity. I also show how *splain*-mediated communication facilitates users in achieving their own discursive intentions to point out language in judgmental and/or lighthearted manners. I assert that attention to metapragmatic neologisms in the perspective of Citizen Sociolinguistics enhances the analytical repertoire of digital discourse analysis.

Keywords: metapragmatics, neology, digital discourse, Citizen Sociolinguistics

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Introduction

A common practice observable in digital discourse, especially on online micro-blogging platforms, is social media users' posts and comments that reflect upon and debate what language is doing in a particular context. When someone's language becomes the object of debate in users' commentaries of current events, we can observe the powerfully reciprocal forces between language and culture. This paper aims to demonstrate a specific way in which varying beliefs are conveyed by focusing on the playful and collaborative uses and reuses of a new suffix, *-splain*, to call attention to, label, and evaluate the pragmatics of someone else's language. After I address some key elements of the environment of online social media discourse more generally, I offer a detailed discussion of *splain* words alongside sociolinguistic constructs and previous literature that pertains to the language under investigation.

Social media platforms have become a choice conduit for publicizing occurrences of misconduct, a practice that is also referred to as internet vigilantism (Jane, 2016) or 'digilantism' (digital vigilantism). Accounts about someone being publicly shamed online are ubiquitous and are wide-ranging in terms of what ignited the criticism, the severity of other's reactions, as well as the justification, since some are cases of being caught red-handed while others are simple misunderstandings (Ott, 2017). Some examples of online infamy born from offline behavior caught on video are racist rants going viral (Bouvier, 2020; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, in press), or anti-immigrant rants going viral (McCarthy, 2020; Robbins, 2018).

In response to these events, what ultimately transpire in the discourse are hundreds of interwoven ideological threads that shade into larger debates of what is virtuous, shameful, acceptable, or punishable. Plenty of these online incidents, which have become the subject of editorial and scholarly interest, are often even named after their *raison d'être*, some examples include: 'voter-shaming' citizens for not voting (Farzan, 2018), 'drought-shaming' homeowners using yard sprinklers during a drought (Milbrandt, 2017); 'slut-shaming' women for not hiding their sexuality (Jane, 2017); 'passenger shaming' travelers' behaviors on airplanes (Small & Harris, 2019), 'mask-shaming' others for wearing a mask due to the global Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Acevedo, 2020) – or for *not* wearing a face mask during an airborne pandemic (e.g., O'Neill, 2020). A genre of social discourse has taken shape in the form of [x]-*shaming* as these discourses on and about public shaming have become a distinguishable interactional genre of social media, a form of language practice actively recognized in social dialogue. That is, practically any subject can be newly affixed to {-*shaming*}, and its meaning is likely automatically understood as it is interdiscursively linked to other instances of shaming that exist in language users' background knowledge.

Language is not only a tool for debating social issues, but an object to be discussed. The high degree of sharing and resharing language on social media can illuminate how and why users' posts and comments so often focus attention on others' linguistic forms, discursive behaviors, and digital practices (Leppänen, et al., 2017). I explore how sociolinguistic and sociopolitical ideologies become manifest through the composition of collaborative, indexical, and perceptual processes including linguistic creativity via word play and linguistic policing via call-out culture. In discussing such discourse, it can be difficult to describe, for instance, the *reflexivity*

of an utterance¹ without mentioning the *creativity* and/or *regulatory/policing* aspects of it as well. Because there are often overlaps in how these constructs help us to interpret what language is doing, I address each of the three key theoretical constructs individually at the core of this paper: (1) I use the notions of ‘metapragmatics’ and ‘enregisterment’ to address linguistic reflexivity; (2) I focus my interest in linguistic creativity to the practice of neology, specifically via blending and affixation; and (3) I approach linguistic policing in social media discourse as examples of ‘call-out culture,’ a label given specifically to the online practice of pointing out ostensibly problematic language, usually in an outspoken and even self-righteous manner, even if the intent of the call out is benevolent.

What is specifically attended to in this paper is how people make use of online micro-blogging platforms to point out inappropriate aspects of language through the creation of new metapragmatic terms via the bound morpheme {-*splain*}. The original *splain* word – *mansplain*, a blend of *man* and *explain* – is a verb that generally refers to a man patronizingly telling a female about a topic she already understands (Bridges, 2017, 2019). Like [x]-*shaming* mentioned above, [x]-*splain* is another highly productive word that has proved to be a prolific resource for calling out problematic speech and simultaneously linking it to other instances of *splaining*.

In my analysis, I illustrate some ways in which social media users employ *splain* words to engage in some form of call-out culture, specifically, calling attention to language that is perceived to be sexist, racially insensitive, or a presumptuous assertion that disregards other points of view. First, though, I offer some background on *-splain*, followed by an account of the theoretical framework as well as the methods and rationale for my data collection and analytical procedures.

Enregisterment and metapragmatics: *X-splained*

There is a prevalence in social media users’ commentaries on current events of how language is not only a tool for debating social issues but a subject of scrutiny in itself, as users take part in discussions about what language is doing in a particular social context. *Splain* terms exemplify this practice as users employ them not only to topicalize other users’ contributions, but also to problematize these on epistemic grounds.

The term *mansplain* is now part of the cultural vernacular. Popularized on social media around 2009, the term is largely accredited to an essay by novelist Rebecca Solnit entitled “Men explain things to me (Facts didn’t get in their way)” that went viral in 2008.² Since then, the term has inspired the coining of endless imitations by way of a new bound morpheme, {-*splain*}, which has proven to be easily recognizable and therefore imitable for successfully marking undermining, presumptuous, and/or incorrect explanations.

There are countless variations of *mansplain*, e.g., *strightsplain*, *richsplain*, or *vegansplain*, to name just a few. These derivatives have continued to appear frequently in social media

¹ *Reflexivity* here is not to be confused with grammatical reflexivity in which the subject is also the object of a verb (“I see myself”). Rather, *reflexivity* occurs when language refers to language (“The verb ‘to see’ in French is ‘voir’”).

² In the essay posted on her blog, Solnit recounts an incident in which a man she had just met proceeded to tell her about “a *very important* book...”. Only after her friend repeated, “That’s her book” four times did the man stop explaining (Solnit, 2008). While Solnit never used the word *mansplain*, her blog is largely accredited to the rise of awareness of men unnecessarily explaining things to women, inspiring the subsequent addition of *mansplain* to the lexicon (Lewis, 2014).

dialogue, articulating the consequences of a culture that values certain people over others. Similar to *-holic*, a recognized affix that can communicate an entirely unique concept, like *yogaholic*, without needing to be defined for its intended meaning to be successfully communicated, it seems nearly any word can be affixed to *splain* to denote an utterance that fails to recognize the experiences of its addressee. However, the most popular *-splain* words are merged with certain labels for social groups, such as those describing gender (*mansplain*, *womansplain*), race (*whitesplain*, *asiansplain*), or sexual orientation (*straightsplain*, *gaysplain*). Some examples of more widely discussed *splaining* include *whitesplain*, explanations from White speakers to racially marked hearers on race-related topics; or *thinsplain*, when thin people assume authority on topics like health, weight, or body-image (Bridges, 2019).

These terms all derive their meaning from other *splains* to communicate an annoyance towards the language described therein. And more severely (even if the discourse is playful), words affixed to *{-splain}* can serve to accuse a speaker of obliviousness or ignorance, and of devaluing voices that speak from a position of epistemic validity. They describe language that carelessly disregards the cultural identity and/or knowledge of the speaker's interlocutor, making them powerful tools for linguistic regimentation.

Splain words continue to appear frequently in social media dialogues, and many have made their way into offline popular culture media such as *Saturday Night Live* (Bennett & Mooney, 2017). While there have been hundreds of editorial pieces dedicated to *splain* terms, they have received very little scholarly attention. Only a small number of academic studies have explored *mansplain* (Bridges, 2017; Dular, 2021; Lutzky & Lawson, 2019) or other *splain* variants (Bridges, 2019; Bridges & Vásquez, under review). Still, several noteworthy points are made in this handful of studies. The capacity of users to recontextualize *mansplain* to reflect multiple viewpoints on the issue of men patronizing or speaking over women goes as far as using *mansplain* as an antonym of the original meaning, i.e., a linguistic weapon used by women to unduly silence men's voices (Bridges, 2017). Not only are *splain* words used to describe language, but their reflexive quality can also be the topic of language, for example, "White people whitesplain 'whitesplain'," (Bridges, 2019). This signifies the meta-meta-pragmatic – or "doubly-metapragmatic" (Bridges, 2017, p. 94) possibilities of *splain* words for discussing language – and language about language. Using corpus linguistics to analyze the words *mansplaining*, *manterruption*, and *manspreading* on Twitter, Lutzky and Lawson (2019) show how gender is appropriated and resemiotized as a variable for indexing ideas "about 'proper' gendered behavior" (p. 1). Going beyond discussions of the *splain* words themselves, what the language described as *splaining* does at the interactional level is deconstructed in Dular (2021) as a form of epistemic injustice, and in Bridges and Vásquez (under review), *whitesplain* provokes moral discussions on race-centered discourse.

As they continue to show up in discourse, *splains* and the language they index become more widely recognized as a genre, undergoing the sociolinguistic process of *enregisterment* (Agha, 2007). Enregisterment refers to how linguistic registers (i.e., social varieties of language) come to be socially recognized ways of speaking that are associated with certain groups of speakers or types of people. When language users reflexively familiarize a way of talking as an object of conversational scrutiny, that way of using language becomes enregistered – it takes on what Silverstein (2003) calls *second order indexicality*. Where first order indexicals (in the sense the term 'indexical' is used in sociolinguistics) are patterns in linguistic features belonging to a

particular type of speaker, those indexicals graduate to the second order when they become encoded in speakers' minds as a means to associate it with a certain social group. A third-order indexical is in essence the birth of a sociolinguistic stereotype; it is when specific linguistic forms that are indexical of social meanings become resources for identity work. A frequently cited example comes from Barbara Johnstone et al.'s (2006) study on the role of mobility in the enregisterment of 'Pittsburghese,' a dialect recognized by a set of linguistic features (first order) that once indexed worker (second order), and then came to represent a marker of local identity and pride (third order). A speaker's use of "yinz" (meaning 'you' plural, from 'you ones') indexes their identity at the second order as a Pittsburgher, at the third order a proud Pittsburgher. In the same way, a speaker's use of certain *splain* words may index some demographic information, as well as aspects of their sociopolitical ideologies. For instance, if a woman labels a man's comment as mansplaining, her usage of *mansplain* presents a second-order indexical of a certain macro-sociological type (e.g., a modern-day feminist). But higher orders of indexicality might also link her to social justice movements and the diverse sociopolitical beliefs that exist about feminists and activists.

The notion of enregisterment is also discussed by Rodney Jones (2016) in the view of *technologization*, whereby words or types of language can be technologies. They are "tools that become associated with bodies of knowledge and collections of techniques as to how to use them (including when to use them, where to use them, the kinds of people who are allowed to use them, and the other tools that they should be used in conjunction with), which have accumulated a certain amount of 'ideological baggage' as a result of this" (p. 72). This is seen in the cases where common names become associated with a stereotype, e.g., Melvins, Chads, Stacy's, and Karens. A 'Karen' for instance is an identity associated with a type of entitled complaining done by middle-class (often middle-aged) White women (and a real-world example is presented later in the paper.) Agha states that enregisterment refers not only to processes of language, but to "practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population" (2003, p. 81). Objects become 'technologized' cultural products and can serve as a form of semiotic meaning-making as memetic symbols, e.g., an image of certain hairstyle, dubbed as 'the official can-I-speak-to-the-manager haircut,' ascribed to the identity of 'a Karen.' (To explain these cultural products: within the popular culture of the U.S., a Karen is seen as someone, typically a White middle-class woman, who feels entitled to getting her way, even at the expense of others. And a hair-do popular among White middle-class women has been added to the stereotype of a Karen through, for example, internet memes.) Linguistic features (spoken or written), paralinguistic (e.g., intonation, rate of speech, vocalizations like groaning or laughing), and extralinguistic aspects of communication (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, chronemics of interactions) are inextricably entwined with how we do language. As such, the notion of enregisterment also helps in understanding the idea of language as active, co-constructed doing: it is in and through *linguaging* that "persons coordinate their actions, intentions, perceptions, and feelings with each other" (Thibault, 2011, p. 215).

Also central to Agha's idea of enregisterment is metalinguistics. "Language users employ language to categorize or classify aspects of language use, including forms of utterance, the situations in which they are used, and the persons who use them" (2007, p. 17). Metalanguage means that language is reflexive: it can refer to itself, speaking about speech, or "using language

to communicate about the activity of using language” (Lucy, 1993, p. 9). A specific subdomain of metalinguistics is metapragmatic language: speech about what language is doing in a particular context. As pragmatics considers what texts and utterances mean depending on the context, metapragmatics could be thought of as the role of consciousness in language use, as the notion focuses on the conditions under which pragmatics – i.e., socially-constructed patterns in language use – are meant to hold (Silverstein, 1993). Metapragmatics refers to how language use itself becomes an object of discourse and, in turn, serves to organize features of language into interpretable events. The concept of *splaining* is a prime example of metapragmatics; to talk about how someone is explaining, describing, or advising something is topicalizing not only what is being said, but how it is being said, and often with intent to regulate that speech.

A growing body of research has investigated how social media provides a space for metapragmatic discussions, and how they illuminate new ways in which people discuss language beliefs, language ideologies, and the relationships between language and identity. The efficiency in which language can regulate its own pragmatics is encompassed in Silverstein’s (1993) notion of *metapragmatic regimentation*. Language can structure and symbolize itself, and it can offer coherence within a communicative event by sectioning off pieces of the communication and associating to it as a socially recognized event. Reyes (2011) illustrates how raciolinguistic ideologies are formed in speakers’ metapragmatic regimentation of racist discourse. Analyzing how Korean American boys decode uses of the word *black* as ‘racist’ she identifies how “discourses can be regimented through both denotationally implicit metapragmatics (e.g., reflexive calibration) and denotationally explicit metapragmatics (e.g., reportive calibration)” (p. 459). Implicit regimentation occurred when the students make indexical connections between *black* and negative qualities (e.g., the black clothing worn by Columbine shooters was mentioned as evidence of their social deviance). Explicit regimentation happened when students humorously interjected, “racism!” after *black* was used to denote aberrance, violence, or insult. The range of implicit-explicit metapragmatic regimentation can be applied to *splains* as well: *whitesplain* for instance is an explicit metapragmatic denotation used to report explanations that are construed as racially insensitive discourse, where the implicit link is between certain communicative features and condescending language, and that link then is calibrated with the enregistered notion of *splain* language.

Heyd (2014) notes that new forms of linguistic gatekeeping are also now possible because of *digital enregisterment*, or “processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms” (Agha, 2003, p. 231) through digital means. Heyd’s study shows how social media affords new methods for *grassroots prescriptivism*. Stæhr (2015) looks at how reflexivity in social media interactions leads to enregisterment across written and spoken language practices, specifically how “the use of such linguistic resources points towards different stereotypes and what sense of rights and sanctions are involved in the reactions to the use of these different types of marked language use” (p. 30).

Adding to this literature, this paper shows how metapragmatic terms like *splains* provide new ways to index and make sense of sociolinguistic surroundings and the tumultuous political climate in relation to what is happening in digital interactions. After anchoring the language of focus in this paper within the sociocultural context and theoretical parameters, social media data is presented first to demonstrate how a viral story provokes debates on smaller scales and

less salient issues. The second section focuses on examples that exemplify three key analytic components of digital discourse – linguistic creativity, reflexivity, and policing. The third group of samples illuminate the implications of analyzing what kind of identity work is being performed through the enregisterment of *splaining* as an interactional genre.

Researching digital discourse

In this section, I discuss social media as “informal and interest-driven activity spaces” in which research approaches to digital discourse has shifted from how linguistic practices are shaped by a platform’s technological affordances to how and why social media participants deploy certain linguistic, semiotic, and discursive resources (Leppänen, et al., 2017, p. 8). The orientation of this paper aligns with other sociolinguistic and discourse studies of online language (e.g., Aslan & Vásquez, 2018; Reyes, 2011; Tagg & Seargeant, 2017), which give detailed attention to the features of users’ multimodal interactions in order to observe what social meanings and norms emerge therein.

A systematic analysis of how discourses in digitally mediated communication develop requires that the analyst understand online language, how it is shaped by the digital practices afforded by the communicative technologies of social network sites, and in what ways online language differs or not from traditional, offline communication. Increasingly, more communication is digitally mediated, and how we interact online is drastically changing the ways we communicate online and offline and what meaning-making resources and strategies look like more generally. For researchers of language, therefore, studying computer-mediated communication – specifically, communication of social media platforms – has two major implications. On the one hand, social network sites provide a research setting that affords opportunities for accessing wide and diverse sources of empirical data. Digital discourse is characterized by everyday internet users interacting and participating in public discussions, making a communicative environment that enables users to access an unlimited amount of information and to rapidly generate their own linguistic content. These electronically mediated interactions make for easily accessible data of authentic language use and linguistic practices. On the other hand, researchers have to consider which aspects of face-to-face discourse are also salient in online discourse. Scholars of digital communication (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2011; Fang, 2008; Jones, Chik, & Hafner, 2015; Tagg, 2015) point out that digital communication has been transforming basic understandings of what constitutes language and how to approach meaning-making strategies in multimodal and highly intertextual discourse (e.g., hashtags, memes); the dynamics of social interactions (e.g., turn-taking, coherence, repair); and the boundaries of discourse communities (e.g., ‘context collapse’ when various audiences are merged in one online space, Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

As Leppänen et al. (2020) emphasize, discursive practices in social media reflect a world of diverse users whose sociolinguistic features have become increasingly multifarious and variable. Consequently, “the pace of both technological development and the [development pace of] ways in which users of these technologies actually engage with them is so swift that research, by necessity, is often several steps behind” (p. 9). Despite the many quick and unpredictable ways that social media practices constantly evolve, there is plenty of research devoted to digital technologies and how users employ them in their communicative practices.

For the everyday user of social media, the affordances and limitations of online discourse have resulted in seismic shifts in the discursive resources that can be deployed to present, construct, and perform their identities. The mass-information and globally networked participatory affordances of social network sites have led to an unparalleled potential for users to be exposed not only to broader varieties of sociolinguistic forms and discourses about language forms, but to entire sociocultural realities beyond their own individual experiences and encounters.³ Subsequently, websites and social media content have an increasing influence on how we communicate and the way we understand how others communicate. The asynchronous nature of social media discourse offers language users more opportunity to organize and tweak their language, thus contributing to “more complex rhetorical, stylistic and content crafting than is typical in synchronous digital discourse,” which can “also have implications for identity work” as “participants may be more conscious and careful in designing and metapragmatically framing and/or commenting on their cues...” for aligning, distancing, identifying, or disidentifying oneself in relation to or by others (Leppänen et al., 2017, p. 9).

Analyzing online language thus gives insights not only on how digital discourse studies has changed the methods in which we communicate, but how people use digital spaces to express their viewpoints and discuss what is important in new ways.

Next, I present an analytical framework that effectively takes into account practices of digital communication as a source of language data for understanding how everyday language use sheds light on macro-level language ideologies and social values. I demonstrate how this framework functions in an examination of reflexive language, linguistic creativity, and language regimentation of everyday language users’ posts and comments Twitter and Tumblr. These data illuminate linguistic trends, and which social issues carry value in the broader social landscape.

Theoretical and Methodological Orientation

The starting point for this framework is the everyday social network site users’ language about language, people’s talk about talk, their commentary on communication. Examining posts/comments that employ metapragmatics, linguistic creativity, and are therefore heavy with social meaning and language ideologies requires theoretical frames that expose how ways of talking connect to certain types of people and social issues. Thus, I employ a combination of theories and analytical approaches, the foundation of which rest largely upon the theory of metapragmatics and the methodology of Citizen Sociolinguistics. In other words, in order to conceptualize metapragmatics in critical discourse of digital communication, I mix a pragmatic, critical discourse approach guided by Citizen Sociolinguistics (Rymes et al., 2017).

Critical digital discourse analysis

With respect to these understandings of discourse and specifically digital discourse, the central methodological approach applied to analyze metapragmatic discourse in this paper is a digital discourse analysis informed by Citizen Sociolinguistics. As digital discourse analysis considers

³ Let me address the fact that there are algorithms that limit what users might see while scrolling and surfing. My point is that despite there being machines programmed to learn user preferences based on their clicking practices, Internet users still have access to more content and therefore more communicative practices than they likely would have in traditional face-to-face communication.

language in social media as a social practice, it is also intrinsically critical because it deals with power relations in the communication are also essential for online discourse analysis. The critical component establishes a relationship between the linguistic elements of digital discourse and social implications, while engaging a strong sensitivity to its sociocultural context. In other words, a combination of critical discourse analysis and digital discourse analysis allows for the understanding of social media interactions as inseparable from the context of its situated reality in which power relations – and challenges against them – are at play, remaining mindful of language as a social practice that is multifaceted, intertextual, and collaborative.

Since Citizen Sociolinguistics and metapragmatics ultimately deal with ideologies of what language does in society, I offer a more concise label for the fusion of these four frameworks: Critical citizen digital discourse analysis.

Citizen Sociolinguistics and Metapragmatics

The various subdomains of Discourse Analysis (DA), and the fields of Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology – disciplines whose concerns are overlapping more and more – all involve the connection of social relations with language and communication and have all contributed to deeper scientific understandings of language in use. However, as Rymes et al. (2017) argue, in the interdisciplinary study of language and society, traditional research methodologies fall short in relation to the rapidly evolving dynamics of communication characterized by today's potentials for mass mobility and connectivity.

Citizen Sociolinguistics is a means to explore how people make sense of variation in the language they encounter (Rymes & Leone, 2014) as well as a means to explore reactions to one another's acts of *linguaging* which get carried out based on the dynamics of ongoing interactions (Thibault, 2011). It is an approach to studying language that considers people's insights on language, in order to better understand what people find valuable (or not) in specific kinds of language practices – and why. A Citizen Sociolinguistics approach to language analysis is especially appropriate when addressing language-ideological discussions that take place within the participatory culture of online discourse, where anyone – layperson or expert – can (and often does) contribute their own opinions about the language-related topic at hand.

Drawing on the notion of Citizen Science⁴ in which information crowd-sourced to laypersons is used by experts for scientific analysis, Citizen Sociolinguistics could be described as a 'populist' lens of sociolinguistics, as ordinary citizens are the ones who point out the meaningful distinctions noticeable in discourse. That is, the layperson, unknowingly being a citizen sociolinguist, provides metacommentary on language that focuses on the peculiarities and attitudes that are noteworthy to them. Thus, Citizen Sociolinguistics not only offers a methodology to manage the evolving ways we communicate, but it also makes sociolinguistics more connected to the everyday language user. This approach contends with any perceptions that only formally trained linguists' evaluations of talk or language use are accurate or worthwhile observations, or that linguists' judgments are necessarily superior in any way with reference to widespread societal beliefs.

⁴ Citizen science is a method of crowd-sourcing information that has existed for centuries in which data collected and/or analyzed by nonexperts (e.g., the migratory patterns of birds) are accumulated to potentially contribute to experts' overall knowledge of a topic.

To clarify what I mean here, let me offer an analogy: A medical doctor's comments on anatomy or pathology would generally be held in higher regard than comments from a layperson. However, the understanding how the layperson talks about medicine is important for at least two reasons. For one, if there were myths circulating, in non-professional discourse, about the causes of an illness or the effectiveness of a treatment, it would be important for the professionals to know about it, in the hopes of correcting people's misguided assumptions that the myths are factual (the coronavirus pandemic no doubt delivers innumerable untold examples.) Secondly, if non-medical professionals make use of their ability (thanks to the mass-connectivity and participatory affordances of social media) to discuss – albeit in layperson terminology – their experiences and/or thoughts concerning an aspect of medical science that is new and therefore under-researched by doctors, these accounts would also be of interest to the professionals. Similarities in such accounts could point out a previously undetected symptom or patterns in a lesser-known anatomical function, flagging itself as a topic of interest for medical researchers. In the same way, Citizen Sociolinguistics can help bridge the gap between what is known “out there,” and what may be worth giving serious scholarly attention by linguists.

Existing Citizen Sociolinguistics research has addressed how aspects of the phonetic or phonological level of language, (such as commentary on a regional accent like New Yorker talk, e.g., Cutler, 2019), as well as the morphosyntactic or semantic level, (commentary on linguistic features that differ across social categories like ethnicity, e.g., Aslan & Vásquez, 2018) are evaluated by other language users. These studies testify to the usefulness of Citizen Sociolinguistics in understanding non-expert perceptions and understanding of linguistic features that index regional or social variation. They focus primarily on the language itself – the qualities of vowels, or the meaning behind a word choice. Connections are made in these studies – *by the researchers, the experts* – between the citizens' metalinguistic observations and the sociopragmatic implications of those comments. What is lacking in Citizen Sociolinguistics research, though, is observing how people draw *their own* connections between what they see happening in language at the micro-level and the broader social ideologies that those patterns contribute to.

Drawing on Citizen Sociolinguistics and its interest in users' metalinguistic commentary, this study extends the focus to users' commentary that addresses both metalinguistic *and* metapragmatic evaluations. In addition to looking at how users comment on and evaluate aspects of the linguistic code itself, I also consider how they evaluate the contextual appropriateness of situated utterances within specific interactions, and how they draw explicit, interdiscursive connections between instances of language use. Therefore, the instances of language analyzed here could be considered examples of what I call Citizen Pragmatics, as their metacommentary addresses the situated, contextualized and sociopragmatic dimensions of others' utterances. I show how *splain* words provoke metapragmatic discussions concerning the appropriateness of an utterance given the social identities of both speaker and addressee(s), the relative power relations between members of different social groups, as well as the overarching topic of the discourse. My approach goes beyond asking how does the metalanguage of citizens show how sociolinguistic differences are understood. It asks how do citizens' metapragmatic disputes reveal not just stances towards highly salient, large scale social issues, but also the underlying, undetected, or overlooked issues that are important to them.

Lastly, using Citizen Sociolinguistics as an anchor in my methodology means that I start off with the viewpoint that Citizen Sociolinguistics goes beyond simply taking people's metapragmatic comments about language seriously. I argue that users' concepts of metapragmatic appropriateness are discursively constructed through highly interconnected metacommentary in a way that is attentive to the nuances of "context collapse" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) and the diversity of participants in the micro-blogging social media environment. In other words, the decision to include Citizen Sociolinguistics in my framework is based on my conviction that users' being able to connect and learn from the vast and diverse range of perspectives that exist in digital spaces. Users therefore have exposure to a much wider range of voices and experiences. Therefore, opportunities to engage in the processes of enregisterment by recontextualizing linguistic and discursive forms in their own way for their own purposes.

In summary, as an analytic framework to this study, I integrate Critical Discourse Analysis specific to Digital Discourse Analysis with the methodology of Citizen Sociolinguistics. Bringing together these methodologies with the theory of metapragmatics frames the approach to analyzing how metapragmatic discourse uncovers various ideologies of how we should or should not be able to talk about other people, and how attitudes illuminate ongoing transformations of normalized social ethics. This framework addresses several research gaps in need of investigation. Despite the fact that metapragmatics is an interdisciplinary construct with a wealth of theoretical development and research about various offline modes of communication, to date, few researchers have explored metapragmatics in online discourse beyond the second-order level. Next, while linguistic creativity both in offline and online discourse enjoys a magnitude of scholarly explorations, *mansplain* and its imitations – albeit popular in weblogs and social media – have been investigated only in a few serious inquiries (cf. Bridges, 2017, 2019; Bridges & Vásquez, under review; Lutzky & Lawson, 2019; Dular, 2021). Finally, issues of diversity, difference, and social justice in social media have also been the focus of many studies across disciplines,⁵ yet very few have approached these issues within the framework of metapragmatics. As a result, there is still much to be explored in terms of how everyday language users, acting as citizen sociolinguists, use social media to discuss ideologies of language practices between social groups. And to my knowledge, no research investigates these topics as they emerge by way of neology.

Data Collection and Analysis

The social media posts presented below come from platforms Twitter or Tumblr and were found through target keyword searches for various *-splain* words. On Twitter, the search engine function yields tweets or replies to tweets in which the keyword occurs, usually tweets that are more current, popular, and/or relevant to the searched language, depending on the algorithmic pattern for returning search results. Clicking on a tweet brings up surrounding discourse, so for instance if a tweet in which *mansplain* occurs is a response to another tweet and/or has responses that respond to it, those previous and subsequent texts are viewable. Tweets can be isolated texts (as in Figure 3 in the section below), or they can be highly dialogic and interactive

⁵ To name only a few: In education (e.g., Gleason, 2016); in linguistics (e.g., China, 2020; Kytölä, 2017); in law studies (e.g., Groucutt, et al., 2018); in philosophy (Dular, 2021); in political science (e.g., Bennett, 2012); in media studies (e.g., Blevins, et al., 2019); in psychology (Al'Uqdahet et al., 2019); and in religion (e.g., Kailani & Slama, 2020).

between hundreds of users branched into limitless strings of discourse (e.g., responses to the texts in Figures 1 & 2). I also collected any tweets that were part of the interaction in which the target word was used as co-textual data. On Tumblr, the search function limits the results to uses of the keyword in the name of users' blog, the title of their blog posts, or any tags added to the blog post; language making up the body of blog posts or occurring in comments on blog posts are not included. A work-around to this problem is to use a site-limited search for the word on Google ("site:Tumblr.com [keyword(s)]"). Co-textual Tumblr data exist in the form of comments on blog posts, although there were no comments on most of the blog posts I came across.

Of course, the process of data collection included deciding which keywords to search for. The 2018 collection focused on *mansplain*, *whitesplain*, *richsplain*, and *thinsplain* because these *splains* were popular enough to generate an appropriately sized dataset, and they represented a wide scope of social categories (gender, race, class, and body size). For the second collection, I started with searches for the same four *splain* terms which added newer examples, many of them addressing more recent social events. My searches developed into an unstructured exploration as I played around with searches that went beyond the *a priori* categories of the larger dataset. This resulted in a miscellaneous subset of *splain* words, as well as digressing from *splain* to other neologisms born from recurrent affixes, namely *man-* terms such as *manterrupt*. The rationale for my emic approach to finding data is that it aligns with how an average social media user and citizen sociolinguist might search for certain language forms. The data represent snapshots of a specific trend in digital discourse. The *splain* variants and other examples of wordplay that are presented below were selected for their capacity to exemplify the central theoretical component of the paper. To analyze the data, I considered: (a) the word as it was used (linguistically or meta-linguistically) (b) what meaning was conveyed in its usage (c) pragmatic elements (e.g., speech acts, paralinguistic cues) and (d) how ideologies about the issue addressed by the word unfold in the surrounding text of the post and in the accompanying comments.

Regarding the ethics of research in digital settings, a few points must be mentioned. Despite the everchanging quality of the context, there are some parameters of data collection, selection, and presentation that, overall, are consistently kept in consideration in sociolinguistic and discourse analytic approaches, which I take seriously and adhere to in my research: The data I accessed and observed is legitimate as it came from returned search results that could be accessed and observed by any typical user in the same way. In terms of data presentation, I should note that it is practically impossible to ascertain the true offline identities of any online author since users could present a profile impersonating a fictitious identity (e.g., Wheeler, 2019). However, when it is helpful to the analysis, I use the gendered pronouns that align with the user if they have chosen to present their gender via the username, handle, profile picture, profile biography, and/or posted content. Additionally, although these data come from posts/comments made publicly available, I prefer to anonymize my data for the purpose of conducting social science research ethically. With the exception of the two players in a viral story whose names have been widely publicized, I use pseudonyms in place of the actual usernames chosen by the account holders, and when gender plays a central role in the discourse, the pseudonyms purposely retain the gender that was presented (and in my data, users presented a female, male, or unknown gender; there were no occurrences of trans, non-binary or other

gender identities that were specified by the user.) Otherwise, I present the language exactly as it was posted, including any profanity or slurs, as well as deliberate or unintentional misspellings or nonstandard orthographic elements. I do so because as a discourse analyst, I believe in representing the language under investigation in an authentic and transparent manner.

***Splain*: generative and relational citizen metapragmatics**

In this section, I present samples of language from micro-blogging social network sites as they appear in social media users' public tweets, blog posts, or comments. I organize them in terms of socially relevant themes, highlighted by three *splain* words. The first shows how the use of *splain* labels sits within the larger digital practice of call out culture. I use the second to elucidate three key dimensions of the language under discussion (creativity, reflexivity, and policing); the third demonstrates the power of these neologisms to ignite citizen sociolinguists' metapragmatic disputes on epistemic authority, social ethics, and how language intersects with bodies and with disparities between social groups.

Whitesplaining Central Park Karen

These days, it is quite common for internet users to go online and inevitably encounter a story about someone's bad behavior that has "gone viral," (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, in press). Such stories of scandal are shared and re-shared on users' social media feeds, typically with users adding their own commentary; sometimes the story's virality becomes newsworthy and the gossip gets spread wider via clickable headlines that take users to an article that provides the context, plot highlights, and often a selection of posts from microblogging sites like Twitter for the purpose of reporting "what the internet is saying" about it. Like celebrities in the tabloids – or the petty criminals of centuries ago locked in the public pillories – anyone who is recorded saying or doing something shocking or belligerent enough to offend the mainstream risks becoming the next object of attention for the Internet mob. The viral story presented below is one example of online public shaming. However, what I show is that users not only engage in the moral outrage against the target of a viral shaming story, but as they discursively construct their rationale for shaming the behavior, even more acts of calling out occur between the users with diverse perspectives and interpretations of the incident.

On May 25, 2020, Christian Cooper, a Black man and avid birdwatcher, had a confrontation in New York City's Central Park with a woman whose dog was unleashed. The woman, Amy Cooper (no relation) who is White, allegedly refused Christian's request for her to leash the dog and, when Christian began using his phone to record her, she called 911: "I'm calling the cops," she said while pointing her finger at him, "I'm gonna tell them there's an African American man threatening my life." The footage then shows Amy carrying out her threat, commanding the dispatcher to "send the cops immediately" to respond to a "threatening" "African American man."

Later that day, Christian's sister publicly shared his video on Twitter, labeling Amy in the tweet as a "Karen" – the recently popularized stereotypical name used to label a disdainful or sanctimonious White woman. Within 24 hours, the video was viewed over 20 million times, and the incident became a viral news story, sparking outrage across multiple networks against this "Central Park Karen." Comments flooded in and screenshots were shared with various online

news outlets, and the cross-platform talk generated endless responses from users of social network sites criticizing the woman's choice of words and her actions.



Figure 1. (left): Image of Christian Cooper (Maslin Nir, 2020)

Figure 2. (right): screenshot from video posted by Melody Cooper (Cooper, 2020)

In the threaded dialogue between hundreds of comments made by users from diverse backgrounds arise a range of elements of the story and its outcome from how the woman treated her dog to the ways the event fits in within the Black Lives Matter movement. On how warranted the woman's punishment is of headline infamy, one user wrote: "She lost her anonymity, her dog, and her job and she deserves it all. She needs a good public shaming... do your thing Twitter," read another tweet accompanied by a close-up shot of the woman's face. This comment exemplifies the notion of *resemiotization* as the user took the viral video to capture a still image of the (evidently then-unnamed) woman and recontextualized that image in a tweet for the purpose of identifying her and ensuring "a good public shaming." The practice of *resemiotization*, i.e., the transposition of semiotic meaning making across time, space, and modalities (Iedema, 2003) is of course not always done for hostile purposes such as in this tweet. This example nonetheless demonstrates how one particular semiotic form was activated to achieve the goal of naming and shaming the individual in the screenshot.

Many more comments focused on how her word choice and tone confirmed her racism: "I'm gonna tell them there's an African American man threatening my life' is was a clear threat to HIS life." Another user wrote, "The cry of distress at the end... Like she really just acted like [Christian] was harming her... She KNOWS exactly what she's doing. Like the "Karens" know... that the system works for them," adding a deliberate element to the racism that is characterized with "them," i.e., the so-called "Karens." Further ideologies emerge in the continuing unfolding of user comments, joining together to construct a set of mutual reinforcements on how racism persists: "She weaponized her tears & knows that the fastest way for cops to respond is to put her virtual white hood on; and Another example of the historic trope of white women lying about Black men to get them killed #EmmitTill"⁶. These comments bring up the notion of *entextualization*, which, like *resemiotization*, is central to the potential of social media to

⁶ Emmitt Till was a fourteen-year-old African-American boy. In 1955, he was abducted and severely beaten before being killed for allegedly whistling at a White woman (Whitfield, 1991).

reshape established social meanings by adding on a new perspective. Entextualization is the process and performance of taking a portion of language production – in this case, the interaction between Christian and Amy in the video – and rendering it “into a unit – a text – that can be lifted out of its interactional setting” (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p. 73, as cited in Androutsopoulos, 2014, p. 6). The language is then recontextualized in its new discursive sites and therefore embedded with new meanings. These concepts are useful for social media discourse characterized by its multimodality, in which users resourcefully enact linguistic, discursive, and semiotic devices to express their perspective.

In further comments responding to the video, another user relates to experiencing racism in the form of ‘Birding while Black’, which was subsequently added to the list of ordinary activities, alongside ‘Driving while Black,’ ‘Shopping while Black,’ and more (see Bauman et al., 2019), that when done by Black people can turn dangerous or even deadly due to racial profiling. She wrote, “I have also dealt with racism while birding... entitled white people who were not familiar with the local birds misname birds and whitesplain/mansplain to me.” Here, *whitesplain* and *mansplain* are used to strengthen the point that it is, at best, an afterthought that a Black individual could also be a birdwatcher, and even then, assumed to have less knowledgeable on the subject than White and/or male laypersons.

What is also worth addressing here is the construction of “[Mundane activity] while Black.” Like calling someone a Karen and like using *splain* words, the “While Black” label is a source for inexhaustible new forms. In this case, the reactive words from a White woman to and about a Black man are interdiscursively linked to other events that have been entextualized and enregistered by the “While Black” label. These language-reformulating processes describe more than simply building upon existing configurations; in creating a new version of the label, users make a claim for recognition and belonging within a structure of shared linguistic repertoires as well as epistemic affiliation. It is saying, ‘I can show that I understand what the existing forms index by identifying and naming a new variety that fits into this referential system.’

As participants seemingly revel in a shared moral outrage against Central Park Karen, their comments can nonetheless result in a cacophony of individualized perspectives on various specifics of the Central Park Karen issue. That is, despite a consensus that Central Park Karen spoke and behaved badly, clashing moral stances still transpire as users deliberate the details and implications of the racist act. A divergent comment is often treated as an impertinence for agitating the rationale of the public’s reaction, for distorting the key issue that the event raises. And so, as elements of the Central Park Karen story are deliberated, disagreements are inevitable; a recurrent byproduct of such ideological friction is users’ sizing up one another’s epistemic credibility. The focus, therefore, of these debates can turn to whose viewpoint carries more validity given their personal experiences – usually in this case by the users’ race, as indicated by the use of *whitesplain*.

(1) @Charlie: Calling the NYPD to a seemingly unarmed and distant person in one of the busiest parks in the country is extremely unlikely to get anyone hurt. [...] It’s not “calling a hit.”

reply1: You’re being deliberately obtuse. I am not even in America, yet I know the amount of danger she was going to put that guy in. Don’t come here trying to [...] whitesplain this. This is a touchy subject. Read an article or two about this.

reply2: Please do not whitesplain nor mansplain

(2) @Steve: both of them reacted poorly.

reply1: He did not. You are attempting to whitesplain. Don't. It's not a good look.

reply2: Thank you for the whitesplain.

(3) @Austin: I can understand a woman alone, confronted by a man preemptively calling the police, no issues with that bit, but the bit about “an African-American threatening...” wasn't even a description for the police, just a trigger word, she lost ALL credibility from THAT.

@reply: You can understand a woman calling the cops on a black bird watcher who asked her to follow the rules clearly posted in a bird watching area? Clearly she was the aggressor until she decided to be the victim #whitesplain #amycopper [sic] #blacklives matter #emmettill

These users do not defend Amy nor deny the racist elements of her choice of words. However, they challenge the claims that she put Christian's life at risk, or they at least empathize with her fear. Each of these comments were made by White users⁷ and each resulted in similar criticism in the comments thread: specifically, accusations of *whitesplaining*, i.e., language from a racially privileged speaker that disregards Black Americans' experiences.

Covidsplain metapragmatic neology

Within the broader practice of online shaming is the practice of calling out others specifically for their language. Albeit less salient than viral stories of online public shaming like Central Park Karen, *splain* language is equally productive in terms of calling attention to others' language and questioning epistemic authority in certain parameters of discourse. The next sample of language (Figure 3) demonstrates how users categorize language as a type of [x]-*splaining* as well as how language play is used to help make sense of new, previously unnamed experiences, which in this case, is one of innumerable instances of neology amid the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic.

The three key dimensions of the digital language with which this paper concerns itself – linguistic creativity, linguistic reflexivity, and linguistic gatekeeping – all occur in the tweet in Figure 3 and its usage of the term *covidsplain*. The newly coined term, possibly by the author of the tweet, is at once a representative example of metapragmatic word play, and one that (indirectly) regulates others' language:

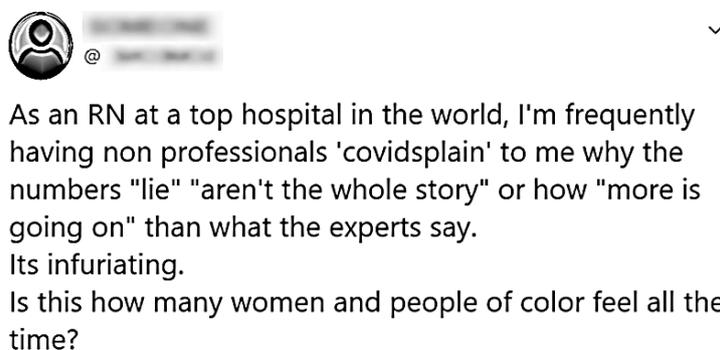


Figure 3. From Twitter. “Covidsplain to an RN [Registered Nurse]”

⁷ The race and/or gender of the user is based on what is presented in the profile picture and username.

Linguistic creativity.

First, *covidsplain* is an example of linguistic creativity and, specifically, lexical inventiveness using the bound morpheme *-splain* to create a new term. Linguistic creativity is part of our daily routines and it functions to help us get things done, establish and maintain relationships, and express creativity and playfulness (Mayor & Allington, 2012, p. 6). Linguistic creativity is social, not individual, though, which is recognizable in perhaps the most conspicuous manner of language creativity – neology, the creation of new words – which occurs almost exclusively by combining or building upon existing words in a variety of ways. Instances of lexical creativity are ubiquitous in social network sites, and Twitter is particularly known as a site of inventive wordplay (Marwick, 2010). Given the ephemerality of tweets due to millions of users tweeting micro-blog texts each day, users make use of discursive practices, such as recontextualizing enregistered forms in new but recognizable ways, to increase their social attention and social gain (Page, 2012).

The usage of *covidsplain* illustrates how people recycle existing forms of language and build upon familiar linguistic practices to denote a new, as yet unnamed experience. In this case, the neologism's meaning is understood because it can be linked to more recognizable *splain* terms, namely *mansplain*, the antecedent of all *splain* words and the enregistered genre to which any type of *splaining* refers. Without mentioning *mansplain/whitesplain*, it is clear that the author himself makes this link, using *covidsplain* first to categorize patients' language within the register of *splaining* (second order indexicality), and also as a performance of identity work (third order indexicality), correlating his experience with what "many women and people of color feel all the time." This comment may signify that this RN did not previously sympathize with the experiences embodied by *mansplain/whitesplain*, but experiencing the struggles of *covidsplain* and reflecting on them in relation to *mansplain/whitesplain* leads to acknowledging the race- and gender-based communicative frustrations, on account of *covidsplain*.

As illustrated in this tweet, users make use of micro-blogging platforms to rearticulate and repurpose discourse from other contexts to achieve objectives that are important to them. Like parodies and satirical comedy, *splain* can simultaneously achieve critical and playful languaging, ranging to variable degrees on the spectrum between serious derision and lighthearted quips. Because the *-splain* root comes from *explain*, a verb that denotes a communicative act, *splain* words are multifunctional speech acts. They automatically refer to language, i.e., to explanations considered to be inappropriate. As the inappropriateness of the explanation is made explicit, they therefore also call the user to account for it.

The creative linguistic process of recombining word parts to add new twists to existing meanings can also be observed in another genre of discourse with which *mansplain* connects.

Additional gendered portmanteau words that are circulated in digital discourses include *man-* (or *bro-*) words like *manterrupt*, *manologue* and *bropropriate*⁸. Their popularity in social

⁸ *Manterrupt* – Unnecessary interruption of a woman by a man to take over the floor, thus disregarding the importance of her ideas, opinions, and intelligence (Bennett, 2015).

Manologue – Monologues by men "on the subject of sports teams, cars, women, fitness etc. regardless of the interest shown by the listener" (Fajerman, 2008).

Bropropriate – When a man (or "bro") takes credit for a woman's idea (Gillett, 2016).

media suggests that for many language users, *man*-isms have become the preferred fashion for encapsulating the communicative insensitivities of some men. That is, due to the facility of blending *man* with words describing elements of communication has proven to be an effective way to convey gendered in language. Alongside countless news stories, blogs, and magazine essays (e.g., Peters, 2010; Bennett, 2015; Khan, 2016; Litwin, 2017; Zimmer, 2017; Hepburn, 2019), plus a small but growing handful of academic studies (Bridges, 2017, 2019; Dular, 2021; Lutzky & Lawson, 2019), have discussed the importance of these gendered terms.

Comparable to *man*-isms, the popularity of *mansplain* has inspired dozens of imitations marking undermining, presumptuous, and/or incorrect explanations. Speakers can affix *splain* to a type of speaker {*man*-, *white*-, *straight*-}, and sometimes to a topic like {*covid*-}, to effectively link it to a category of explanatory language known for being unwarranted, presumptuous, or patronizing. As such, *covidsplain* illustrates how linguistic creativity and wordplay are expedited via the interactive affordances of today's social media platforms.

Linguistic creativity, such as wordplay via [*x*]*splain*ing, and *man*- words (as well as [*x*]*shaming*, *Karens*, [*x*] *while black* discussed above) expediently and cleverly compress multiple meanings into one, providing labels for previously unnamed social phenomena. The terms are potent in meaning as their usage serves as social commentary regarding communicative dynamics between speakers. For example, several women on Twitter bring to light an observation of male dominance over health discourses amid the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic: remarking on med-tech webinars and panels that are repeatedly comprised only of men, one user tweeted, “Are meninars the new manels?” with an image of a flyer featuring all men and reading “Ask the Experts”. Another woman’s response: “Seriously, how many times do we need to repeat it? #NoMoreManels.” In only a few words, the tweets pull from a number of discourses in order to illustrate their epistemic reality of widely unnoticed and unacceptable underrepresentation of women in crucial dialogues on the global pandemic.

These tweets also demonstrate how the strategies by which users engage the affordances of social network sites significantly impact the linguistic resources they apply, and thus the unfolding of interaction between them. On Twitter for example, one of its defining characteristics, a 280-character limit on the length of each tweet, often compels Twitter users to resort to linguistic creativity, such as spelling variations as meaning-making resources (Tagg, 2015). The usage of *covidsplain*, *manels*, and other forms of lexical blending endow individual words with intricate cultural histories, resulting in micro-texts that impart immense ideological meaning in only a few words. These tweets effectively communicate consequences of when a speaker’s epistemic identity is discounted, or what Fricker (2007) would call, “prejudice in the economy of credibility” (p. 19).

Linguistic reflexivity.

The second construct demonstrated by the tweet is the notion of reflexive language. Reflexive language can be self-referential, or other-referential; that is, it can be about the speaker’s own language (e.g., “What I meant was...”), or about another’s language (e.g., “He didn’t sugarcoat it...”). In the tweet above, the term *covidsplain* communicates an annoyance towards other speakers’ language, thus the word is an example of metapragmatic language, i.e., speech about what language is doing in a particular context. It is when “talk about talk” performs as a commentary on communicative norms. Understanding metapragmatics is central to

understanding how we “connect various features of linguistic behavior to a larger moral order” (Cameron, 2004, p. 314).

When language users discuss some form of *splain* language, they are presenting their metapragmatic awareness through the ‘mutual calibration’ (Silverstein, 1993, p. 41) of the metapragmatic signaling event and the signaled pragmatic event structure. In other words, users are reporting on their interpretation of linguistic forms and the social meaning of those forms vis-à-vis what is normative, accepted, and appropriate. In addition, *splain* terms are often forms of reported speech, as metapragmatic language can “re-animate” speech, implanting it in a new setting with a new purpose (Lucy, 1993, p. 9). The tweet uses *covidsplain* in conjunction with reported language: “the numbers ‘lie’ ‘aren’t the whole story’ or how ‘more is going on’.” What social media users achieve in the usage of *splains* is a discursive construction of evaluation that metapragmatically communicates varying beliefs of what represents, or what should represent, linguistic appropriateness in speech to certain people and/or about certain topics. Labeling these utterances as *covidsplaining* serves to accuse those speakers of devaluing the voices that speak from a position of epistemic validity. In the case of the tweet above, it is the utterances of non-experts (“non professionals”) to a professional (“an RN at a top hospital in the world”) about a topic (the Covid-19 virus).

Linguistic gatekeeping.

Labeling someone else’s language as a form of *splaining* comes with a risk of retaliation from those so designated, especially when an entire social group is encompassed in the word itself, such as the male gender in *mansplain*. As a result, *mansplain* has been redefined by some, rebranding the word as a linguistic weapon, aligning it with other forms of linguistic policing like politically correct language or censorship. This view of *mansplain* as a convenient tool for shutting down others’ speech without warrant reflects another perspective of modern social discourses. Dismissing the legitimacy of the word’s usefulness simultaneously, and perhaps unwittingly, communicates a rejection of broader social issues from which the problem of mansplaining was born. For example, in response to the tweets mentioned earlier on *manels* and *meninars*, one male user wrote, “#Feminism is basically a bunch of gals thinking up new words like: #Manspreading #manterrupt #mansplaining Oh and blaming men for all their troubles.” Consequently, the term takes on two, converse meanings: on the one hand, it describes men eclipsing women’s voices, and on the other hand, it is a word used by women to silence men. Regardless of users’ viewpoints on the word or the debates it provokes, the fact remains that the word prompted users to reflect on their own and other’s language and discuss the consequences of sociolinguistic practices they may not have previously considered.

Rejections of *mansplain* and other *man*-isms or *splains* brings up the last element of metapragmatic neology: language policing. Linguistic policing occurs when reflexive language attempts to regulate or manage another’s speech, and it is related to a larger cultural phenomenon of online behavior of known as call-out culture. As the story of Amy Cooper shows, if a call out goes viral, the called-out person is at risk of being scorned and shunned on a national, even international, scale.

The disembodied nature of online communication has allowed for users to interact in ways that were not as widely observable prior to the advent of social media (Tagg, 2015), and one of these ways is publicly confronting behavior or language perceived to be harmful or offensive to

others. Such confrontations, while presumably in the name of morality, are often viewed as acts of censorship or done by those who are too quickly offended and can therefore generate more conflicting discourse between strangers online. I discuss wordplay in conjunction with the larger phenomenon of call-out culture because *splain* words contextualize pragmatics: they are simultaneously products of wordplay and about what language is doing in a particular social context.

Users' interactions that employ or react to *splain* words provide an opportunity to explore shifts in people's language practices, ideologies, and their stances towards certain ways of talking. However, there are additional implications of analyzing metapragmatic discourse in social media that cannot be fully exemplified in the examples above. The term *covidsplain* – while useful for demonstrating the dimensions of linguistic creativity, reflexivity, and policing – is a more humorous example of *splain* words and is unlikely to ever be widely used. But other *splain* terms have the capacity to activate dialogue on more widely consequential issues in how we talk to and about one another and provoke discussions on complicated issues deeply ingrained in the social psyche. In the next section, *thinsplain* is presented to exemplify further discursive outcomes of some metapragmatic online communication.

***Thinsplain*, epistemic ownership and social movements**

In this section, I examine how *splain* language can also be used to dispute epistemic ownership of certain discourses, which in turn, reveal the processes in which language comes to index higher orders of social meaningfulness (Silverstein, 2003). That is, within disputes of who does or does not have the epistemic authority to talk about certain topics, recognized ways of speaking become interlaced with specific social trends, such as activism for body positivity or fat acceptance. In the case of *thinsplain*, the discourses around the word connect body size to a range of ideologies about physical health, mental health, and beauty standards, as well as gradual shifts from stigmatizing to accepting diverse body sizes.

In the first two examples (Figures 4 and 5), users indirectly describe language from others as acts of *thinsplaining*, and subsequently contribute to the definition of *thinsplain* as comments from thin- or smaller-bodied speakers about topics or experiences of fatness. Similar to a man *mansplaining* to a woman about, say, childbirth, or hospital patients *covidsplaining* contagion management to a medical professional, thin speakers talking about certain topics, often in a supercilious way, to or about fat people,⁹ are seen acts of *thinsplaining*. Discriminatory language about fatness and ignorant explanations to fat people become an increasingly recognizable category of discourse each time users categorize such language with the *thinsplain* label. In users' social media posts below, acts of *thinsplaining* are seen as hijacking the conversation away from speakers who, being fat, have firsthand experiences and therefore epistemic authority to speak on those topics.

The notion of *thinsplaining* is indirectly defined in the next tweet (Figure 4). The user creates a hypothetical interaction between herself, who remains silent, and a “thin girl,” a speaker that

⁹ While in many contexts, the label *fat* is considered a negative or pejorative one, in the discourses of Fat Studies and fat activism, the term *fat* is the preferred term by some people who do not consider themselves thin, and fat activists are calling for the reclaiming of the word *fat* to be used proudly to eliminate the negative connotation that has surrounded the word for so long (Nash & Warin, 2017; Van Amsterdam, 2012).

possibly represents the voices of multiple thin girls, in order to portray a perceived linguistic pattern in the user's past exchanges:

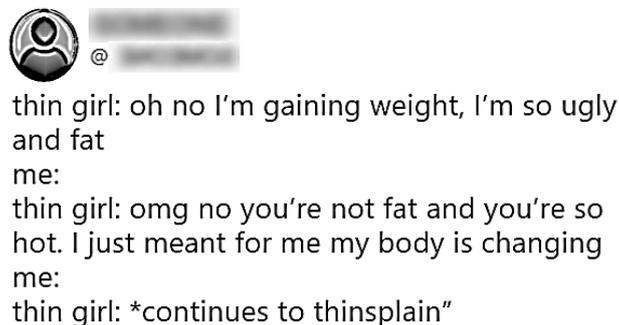


Figure 4. Twitter. *What thin girls say.*

Complaints from the thin girl about weight gain and feeling fat are perceived by the user as thinsplaining, which links thinsplaining language with the related notion of 'thin privilege,' i.e., unawareness of the unjust social advantages of thin people "as a result of the pervasiveness of weight bias and negative attitudes towards fatness" (Nash & Warin, 2017, p. 75). When "thin girl" *thinsplains* about her woes of gaining weight and calls herself "ugly and fat" in response to her body changing (but not to the point that that her interlocutor is not still thin), it suggests that, for one, she equates fat with ugly, and also that she is unaware of others' experiences of fat stigma.

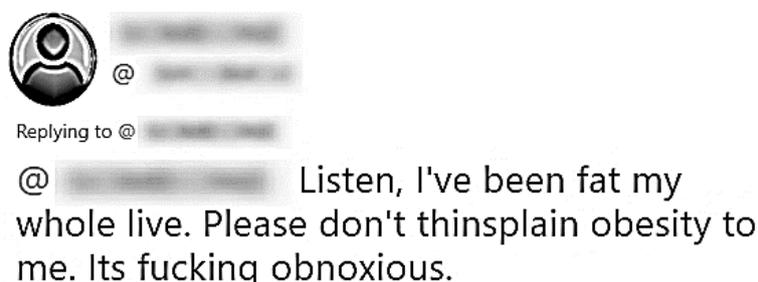


Figure 5. Twitter. *Don't thinsplain obesity.*

The next example (Figure 5) is a tweet in which a user deploys *thinsplain* to label another user's comment on the topic of obesity, evaluating the act as "obnoxious" since the topic is one on which fat people have long been well-informed. The sociopragmatic meaning conveyed here is that, as a self-described life-long fat person, they have more testimonial value on obesity and therefore epistemic ownership of the society's conversation about the topic.

This point is deepened with the fact that body size is gradable (in contrast to other social categories like race or gender that are more often unchanged). In the dialogues of fat acceptance and fat activism the voices of those who promote a hardline stance of fat pride are at odds with those who were once fat and lost weight. Discrepancies of who is 'thin' or who is 'fat' lead to battles over claims for epistemic authority. For instance, experiences of being 'very fat' carrying more value in fat-acceptance discourses than the experiences of so-called 'small fats.' In Figure 6, a user applies the thinsplain label to the language of an individual who is not thin, but less fat, therefore ascribed less epistemic ownership of fat discrimination narratives:

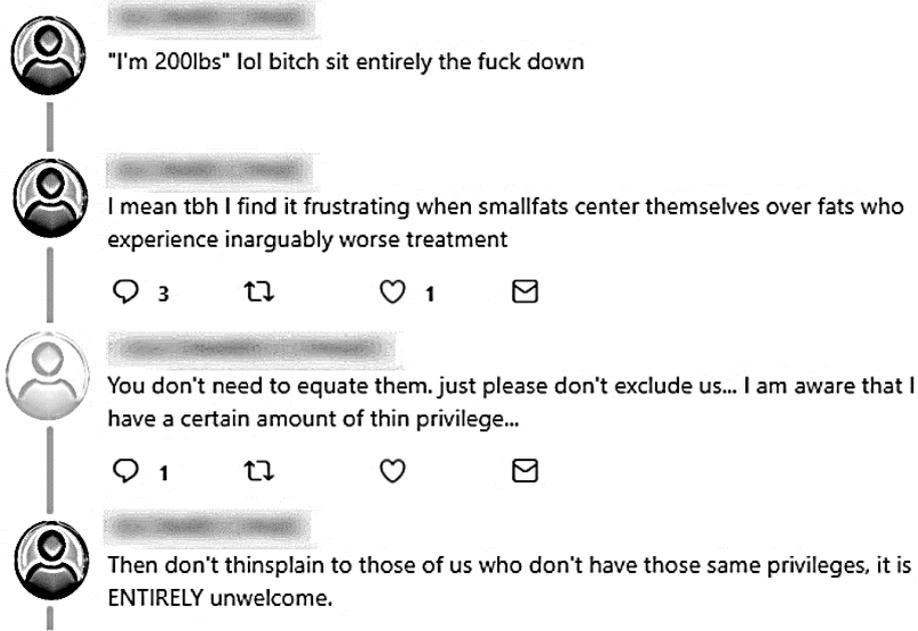


Figure 6. Dialogue with a “smallfat”

Finally, in talking about their experiences, it becomes apparent that open expression of contempt for fat bodies is prevalent and even acceptable, given anti-fat language (as opposed to sexist or racist language) is still at present usually met with impunity beyond a disapproving frown or chastising comment. And not uncommonly, it is even treated as an act of concern for the health and wellbeing of others, which is shown in the next example (Figure 7). Before going further in this discussion, it should be noted that this example is the only exemplar presented that comes from Tumblr, yet the original text that the Tumblr post comments on is from Twitter. This speaks to the character of public discourse that tends to favor texts that are short and sharply worded. Ott (2017) underscores how in the “Age of Twitter,” digital practices “privilege discourse that is simple, impulsive, and uncivil” (p. 59). Like memes, tweets are easily captured and re-posted elsewhere in social media, as exemplified in Figure 7, an image of a tweet that was recontextualized on Tumblr. This Tumblr user shared a screenshot of a tweet on their Tumblr blog with accompanying hashtags, serving in the function of resemiotizing the tweet with the Tumblr user’s own commentary, the first being #thinsplainer:



Figure 7. Tumblr. Recontextualizing language as thinsplaining.

The user connects thinsplaining to a tweet posted previously by another user, effectively connecting this type of *splaining* language to elements mentioned in the tweet, namely “health concerns of plus sized women.” The tweet creatively makes a link between health and alcohol poisoning, and between plus sized women and Josh. The presupposition that occurs, then, is that people like “josh” buy into mainstream narratives such as the notions around body size and health: not only that fat cannot equal healthy, but that unhealthy bodies are equated with fat bodies but not with bodies poisoned by alcohol. The tweet sheds light on a double standard (which the Tumblr user also observed, as shown in the tag “#double standards.” What this shows is that the semantic and pragmatic functions of a text can reveal how people draw on ideologies that are socially recognized as indexical of speakers (e.g., the stereotype of people like Josh), and wider discourses (e.g., health) to express themselves and their point of view in creative ways.

Discourses around instances of *thinsplain* intertwine with the movement of body positivity, fat acceptance, and challenging fallacious associations between body size and health. Attention to how body image is valued in today’s culture can be ascertained by the developments in how physical and mental health are discussed and by observing the discourses that work to challenge or to promote certain standards and norms related to body size. The discussions that unfold around *thinsplain* indirectly bring to light the fact that in discourses on health and on beauty, thin is the norm. Ultimately, users’ narratives and disputes show that physical shape carries significance in sociocultural experiences, and that having those experiences taken seriously beyond the fat-positive community is currently a difficult feat and at times even met with hostility. These pieces of citizens’ language demonstrate how *thinsplain* discourses provide opportunities for people to discuss sociolinguistic experiences of body size and share how their experiences challenge broader social ideologies.

Finally, *thinsplain* discourses bring up the notion of ‘thin privilege,’ another example of repurposing an existing idea, i.e., White privilege, to extend to a different identity group in which members are privileged or marginalized, in this case for their body size. Therefore, *thinsplain* is also used to bring attention to and legitimize body shaming as part of the wider left-wing political discourse while also gatekeeping on the size of the people who get to talk about body-shaming experiences.

Discussion

This paper has presented an approach to studying digital discourse that focuses on metapragmatic lexical creativity that serves to evaluate language use. Critical and digital discourse analysis and metapragmatics are interdisciplinary, drawing from domains like anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics, literary theory, ethics, and philosophy. The approach that I presented here is framed by these interdisciplinary views of language study, along with Citizen Sociolinguistics which calls for understanding online metalinguistics and metapragmatics as discourse that is afforded by the highly interconnected nature of social media. This paper has aimed to show that this approach is useful for observing the process of enregisterment and identity work achieved through participants’ high degree of adopting, appropriating, recontextualizing, and redefining language forms.

The data focused on content written in English and about sociopolitical issues that are much less relevant, if recognizable, to the world beyond U.S. society. Therefore, while the same approach could be applied to exploring issues that are specific to another culture and discussed

in another language, this approach to sociolinguistic study is nonetheless limited. Some potential limitations include: differences in cultural perspectives and values on publicly discussing social issues; differences in accessibility to online community platforms; differences in how metapragmatics works in other languages; differences in processes of neology and wordplay in other languages with different structures and/or writing systems.

Studying metapragmatics in digital discourse is also significant in that it illuminates ideologies that connect and shape us, as well as wider implications of regulating one another's linguistic behavior. Language plays a crucial role in sustaining, repeating, and transmitting social practices and norms, and it can reveal how ideologies come in contact with and influence one another. The practice of metapragmatic neology – exemplified in this paper through the flexibility of the *-splain* affix – encompasses lexical playfulness, linguistic reflexiveness, and linguistic gatekeeping. Analyzing metapragmatic neology is effective in uncovering multiple perceptions underlying users' interpretations and performance of pragma-linguistic conventions, as well as their alignment to sociopolitical issues.

In uses of *splain* terms, these citizens' metapragmatic comments of what speech should or should not be allowed expose the role that language plays in practically any social issue. The metapragmatic disputes in and around uses of *splain* emphasize the power of language, not only as a tool for debates on social issues, but as a social action of languaging to be discussed in terms of what is appropriate to say by certain people, to certain people, and in certain contexts, as well as how it should or should not be said. Whitesplains on race-centered stories like that of Central Park Karen, tweets using *thinsplain*, and any other dialogue discussing elements of language in use can often transpire into discussions about the power of how we shape our language to progress or protect social values.

Additionally, neology and linguistic creativity is useful in micro-blogging platforms for making language noticeable in spaces like Twitter where user-generated content even on trending topics is ephemeral. Creative reflexive language often provides new ways to refer to and categorize what is going on in language, such as experiences shared by a social group or an annoyance or behavior that had been previously unnamed. Labeling it allows others to recognize it and eventually for a category of speaking to be widely recognized and discussed: e.g., identifying certain types of speakers ('Karens'); categorizing social practices ('shaming' language), and describing communicative dynamics (from a nonexpert to an expert, from a thin person to a fat person). Methodologically, focusing on metapragmatic neology essentially filters broader instances of public shaming of behaviors to specifically citizen sociolinguists' comments on language and language norms. If we want to understand how cultural values towards sociopolitical matters are constructed and how they evolve, attention to any individuals' viewpoints on the matter is just as important as how they are discussed by experts or academics or magazines.

When people speak metapragmatically about current events, they not only communicate viewpoints on the relevance, urgency, and legitimacy of the event; they also reflect – usually indirectly so – on wider issues, such as the relatability of that event to other, similar current or historical happenings and the role social media plays as a real influence on social ethics. These discourses often interlink with cultural presuppositions, becoming symbolic events through which people can discuss the nature of society more generally. As such, comments regarding Amy Cooper's words, for example, are not just one-time acts of criticizing a momentary

exchange in the park; these micro-level experiences are understood through their connection with one another – with other texts drawing upon similar personal experiences, related historical events, and comparable recent viral social media videos. Individual texts thus fuse together to evince the veracity of macro-level issues – in this case, the endurance of racism. At the same time, individual comments are never just about the micro-level event or macro-level culture that they reference; users' evaluations of language in use are also always a performance through which citizens construct their identities through indexically positioning themselves in relation to others and the sociopolitical elements of the topic at hand.

These discourses indeed exist and can be studied without focusing on neologisms like *-splain* words, which some view as silly, worthless, unhelpful, or even contemptible. However, regardless of users' opinions about the words or the communication described therein, focusing on metapragmatic neology gives access to worthwhile linguistic data. These words problematize sociolinguistic imbalances and prompt users to consider the epistemic perspectives of their addressees, to reflexively discuss the appropriateness of their own and others' language, and to share stories that validate their beliefs. In turn, users' observations may invoke broader social tensions such as the existence of inequalities and unfamiliarity of others' experiences. When the words spark metapragmatic disputes, it leads us to where hot topics are unfolding; in other words, where sociolinguistic friction occurs is often the site of societal evolution.

What words like *mansplain*, *whitesplain* and *thinsplain* do to epistemics expands beyond the level of language and discourse. A fuller understanding must be broadened beyond discussion of *splains* as just words. Knowledge of language necessitates knowledge of the linguistic code as well as socially constructed symbolic values. Interactions provoked by *splains* also actualize bodies, practices, and orderliness within specific sociopolitical positions. As these terms foreground aspects such as gender, body size, and skin color, they entwine language with speakers' biological features, and therefore bodies with speaker agency. Our biology and social experiences constitute our perception of the world, therefore our language cannot be understood as separate from our bodies, actions, intentions, and attitudes.

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