



Metapragmatic neology in digital discourse: Solid groundwork for Morphopragmatics and Construction Morphology

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Abstract. This note addresses the topic of Judith Bridges’s focus article, namely *-splain* neologisms such as *mansplain*, *thinsplain* and *covidsplain*, from the perspective of morphological theory. I attempt to show that Morphopragmatics, a subfield of morphology, can account for the complex pragmatics of word formation processes like those in *-splain* neology. I propose that the analysis of *-splain* words as constructional idioms, under the framework of Construction Morphology, provides a suitable account of the pragmatic effects associated with the innovations in this lexical pattern.

Keywords: morphology, neology, Morphopragmatics, Construction Morphology, digital discourse.

In this note I respond to Judith Bridges’s focus article, “Explaining *-splain* in digital discourse” (Bridges, 2021). The author discusses a very prominent current issue: how language may not be a mere vehicle for the expression of thought, which was traditionally seen as its most important role. Instead, language may become the subject of scrutiny – a phenomenon referred to as ‘metapragmatics’ (Silverstein, 1993) – from the perspective of its use on social media platforms, a phenomenon referred to as ‘metapragmatics’ (Silverstein, 1993). Bridges centers her analysis on a group of contemporary lexical innovations, the so-called ‘*-splain* words’ (e.g. *mansplain*, *thinsplain*, *covidsplain*), used to denote presumptuous discourses.

The features of the neologisms under study are not examined in isolation, but in the broader communicative context in which they occur (e.g. Twitter threads, Tumblr posts). This offers remarkable research results, in which a bidirectional relation is established between language and ideology. Examples include instances in which Twitter users employ the term *covidsplaining*, express sympathy with social groups who are experiencing *mansplaining*, and

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when *whitesplaining* is prompted in the context of a ‘While Black’ Label thread (Bridges, 2021, p. 16): “@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 #emmetttil”.¹

Bridges’s paper assumes a view of language as a collaborative practice, and as such has a sociolinguistic orientation (in the sense of Citizen Sociolinguistics, Rymes et al., 2017). Thus, my goal here is to reflect on how Metapragmatics can be represented from the perspective of the individual speaker’s internal grammar. As we know, a traditional divide is said to exist between grammatical competence and performance (Chomsky, 1965). At first, both morphology and neology would be considered as belonging to the former, and thus the paradox arises: provided that speakers access pragmatic knowledge in the context of retrieving and coining new *-splain* words, how is this knowledge represented in the mind of the individual speaker? I will argue for a few promising approaches, including Morphopragmatics and Construction Morphology.

The family of *-splain* coinages is expanding fairly quickly on social media platforms and elsewhere. Indeed, some recognizable features of social media communication, such as asynchrony and intertextuality, clearly facilitate linguistic creativity. Most importantly, the products of individual acts of creativity are recorded and shared rapidly, often in real time (Leppänen et al., 2017). Consequently, I think that the study of neology using digital corpora could lead to some of the most deeply-rooted views on word formation processes being challenged. On the one hand, ‘recordability’ guarantees that a large amount of *hapaxes* (i.e. one-time occurrences of words) remain registered in the digital record, providing the world’s netizens with a more tangible, realistic view of the productivity of morphological processes than ever before. Indeed, prior to the appearance of the Internet, most innovations by anonymous speakers in spontaneous spoken conversations surely received little attention, leaving as they did no or little trace, and thus did not lead to neologisms or become part of the language. On the other hand, the instantaneous spread of language facilitates the quick conventionalization of new words.

Morphopragmatics

As Bridges (2021) points out, *-splain* words communicate an annoyance toward the ‘enregistered’ speech of specific social groups (Agha, 2007; Jones, 2016). They are used to call attention to discourses perceived to be sexist, insensitive or presumptuous, or even as a form of linguistic policing: people’s epistemic authority to use *-splain* words is questioned when they do not belong to the social groups perceived as the rightful ones to do so (for instance, women conforming to contemporary beauty standards are shunned when using *thinsplain*) (Bridges, 2017).

It is clear that the research field of Morphopragmatics (Dressler & Barbaresi, 1991; 2011) can best account for the questions raised by the *-splain* phenomenon. According to Dressler and Barbaresi (1991: 49), “Morphopragmatics is interested in the creation, the attitudes towards and evaluations of morphological rules by socially definable groups as users”. Instead of analyzing the pragmatics of specific lexical items, a morphopragmatic approach aims to explore the

¹ However, I agree with an anonymous reviewer of this note that the conclusions of the focus article should be confirmed with a quantitative-based study, as the current proposal addresses only a few specific examples.

morphological processes that seem to involve a pragmatic function. Morphopragmatics has been applied to the study of the context-dependent meaning resolution of diminutive suffixes (Wierzbicka, 1984), the analysis of gendered words (Cantero, 2021), and specific morphological patterns such as (*sugar*)-*free* constructions (Motsch, 2018). Note that the use of a noun in the variable slot of *-free* words implies the desirability of a lack of something that it is not inherently undesirable, as in *water-free stain remover* or *tree-free greetings*; its ‘undesirableness’, then, is expressed within the morphological structure. Similarly, *-splain*, from *explain*, develops its special metapragmatic value only through the conventionalization of a morphological schema from an identifiable source word (e.g. *mansplaining*), which is probably no longer needed in order to elucidate the meaning of other *-splain* words, or to create new ones.

A morphopragmatic analysis of *-splain* words implies that there exists in current English an innovative word formation pattern $[N+splain_v]_v$ that contains a pragmatic feature [presumptuous discourse] which is necessary within the description of its meaning. The advantage of this analysis is that it would reflect how the individual speaker incorporates *-splain* neologisms spontaneously with an intended pragmatic effect. Moreover, the existence of such a morphopragmatic pattern rules out the possibility that the semantic denotation of *explain* (‘to make clear or understandable’; ‘to give the cause or reason of’) will overrule its actual meaning in any potential innovation related to *-splain* forms, because only the use of the verb as the head of a morphologically complex word attains the intended pragmatic effect. What interests the speaker is not to describe a particular kind of discourse (in which case *mansplain* would be understood as ‘something explained in a men-like fashion’), but its association with certain linguistically expressed reprehensible linguistic attitudes.

After presenting the specific subdomain of morphology within which *-splain* words might be best considered, I note the theoretical framework that I consider most appropriate to account for the pragmatic information linked to a morphological schema, as in *-splain* words.

Construction Morphology

Despite its undeniable contributions to the understanding of the use of neologisms, Bridges's paper does not delve into the exact morphological nature of the words under analysis. There are in fact a few inconsistencies. For example, *-splain* is referred to in different parts of the paper either as a bound morpheme (p. 3), a suffix (p. 2), or a verbal root (p. 17), while the use of each of these has different implications in morphological theory. Considering *-splain* as a suffix would suggest that it has lost its lexical content, namely that it no longer *denotes* something similar or comparable to an act of explaining. By contrast, considering it as a root would suggest a process of compounding (even if the original *mansplain* is a blend), which would lead to other controversies, since English verbal compounding is typically regarded as an unproductive word formation process (Bagasheva, 2011).

Moreover, Bridges assumes, albeit implicitly, that new *-splain* words are created by analogy with their previously existing *-splain* counterparts. Thus, she seems to discard the possibility that *splain* is stored in the speaker's lexicon as an independent morpheme tied to its specific, newly acquired meaning, a semantic extension from the original *explain*, which would be the natural assumption of rule-based approaches to word formation. However, a purely analogical approach is problematic as a means of accounting for lexical innovations such as *covidsplain*, because the *-splain* models include mostly animate nouns to represent the social groups

responsible for ‘splaining’, such as *man*, *thin*, etc. An example such as *covidsplain* illustrates that the specific metapragmatics of the *-splain* words is no longer accessed through a process of decomposition plus analogical composition (if *man+splain* = ‘splain like men [to women]’, then *thin+splain* = ‘splain like thin people [to overweight people]’). Instead, it has generalized over the whole [x+splain] schema.

Fortunately, Construction Morphology (Booij, 2010; Masini & Audring, 2019) is a morphological theory which has the specific purpose of accounting for both analogy and pattern-based neology, as well as for problematic cases regarding the affixation/compounding divide. It assumes a hierarchical lexicon with different levels of abstraction, from concrete individual words to more abstract patterns, all of which, being schemas, are interconnected via their shared phonetic, morphocategorical, semantic – and, we should add, morphopragmatic – features.

Booij (op. cit.) illustrates the leap from analogical word formation to a morphological pattern with several examples, such as *Watergate*, the original model for the now productive *-gate* word family. *Gate* constructions are better characterized these days as the byproducts of a schema in which there is a variable first member [(N)] introducing the entity with which the fixed second member, *gate*, meaning ‘political scandal’, is related (*Iraq-gate*, *Maggie-gate*, even used in other languages such as Spanish: *Delcygate*)².

In other constructions, previously existing lexemes, such as Dutch adjectives *dol* (‘mad’) or *stom* (‘stupid’), develop an intensifying meaning when appearing as the first member of adjectival compounds (*dolblij* ‘very happy’, *stomverbaasd* ‘very surprised’). These examples show a clear parallelism with *-splain* words in that the fixed members of a construction can receive a specific interpretation when embedded in a complex word. Booij considers them to be *constructional idioms*, that is, schemas with one member specified (which would be the case with *-splain* constructions). In sum, I would like to suggest that *-splain* words are constructional idioms that add to the schema’s specification the metapragmatic considerations presented in Bridges’s paper, which are evidently absent in the use of the verb *explain* in isolation. Following the conventions of Construction Morphology, the *-splain* construction can be formalized thus:

$$[[x]_{Ni} [splain]_{Vj}] \leftrightarrow [presumptuous\ discourse\ related\ to\ x_i]_j$$

Where the first member of the construction is variable (x), but necessarily a noun, and the second member is constant (*splain*), the latter being the one that acts as the head of the construction and provides the verb category for the whole (morphologically complex constructions are right-headed in English). The resulting word is provided with its own index as a new word (j), but, crucially, its meaning depends on the particular relation between the verb and the variable noun (*mansplain*, then, is the presumptuous discourse issued by men; *covidsplain*, the one related to self-proclaimed *Covid-19* experts, and so on).

In future work, I would like to see how morphopragmatic knowledge can be formalized properly within a constructionist theory. Obviously, the bridge between the traditional domains of ‘lexical’ and ‘pragmatic’ information in neology will be of interest for models that focus on the fact that lexical entries are not mere repositories of purely linguistic meaning, but are symbolic units activating all the required knowledge (either linguistic or encyclopedic) implied in the consideration of language as a social practice, as is the case with Cognitive Semantics

² <https://www.larazon.es/internacional/20200211/6z7cnuy675gy5ctoofw4eetvmm.html>

(Valenzuela et al., 2012). My discussion note of Bridges's paper has thus sought to emphasize the benefits of interdisciplinary research on the study of neology in digital discourse.

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