



## Discussing *-splain*: At the intersection of prescriptivism, language policing and moral gradience

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**Abstract.** This discussion note offers a response to Judith Bridges' focus article "Explaining '-splain' in digital discourse". We review some of the article's core findings on the bound morpheme *-splain*, utilised in words such as *whitesplain*, *covidsplain*, and *thinsplain*, and expand on them by addressing three key concerns: we situate the construction and use of *-splain* formations in a more expansive version of prescriptivism, what we refer to as 'prescriptivism 2.0'; discuss them within the context of language policing and political correctness; and ask whether forms ending in *-splain* are subject to moral gradience, highlighting directions and opportunities for future research.

**Keywords:** *-splain, prescriptivism, language policing, moral gradience*

### Introduction

In what has since come to be a form of Internet mythologising, the term *mansplain* entered public consciousness following the publication of Rebecca Solnit's article "Men explain things to me" (Solnit [2008] 2012). Although Solnit never directly used the word *mansplain*, her article nevertheless galvanised its wider usage, leading to a significant surge across a range of contexts, including on social media. In the intervening 15 years, *-splain* has come to join the cannon of famous suffixes, including *-gate*, *-zilla*, and *-geddon* (Zwicky 2010 also calls these forms *libfixes*, or 'liberated affixes'), generating widespread debates concerning both its utility and its targets, particularly in relation to the cultural politics of gender, race, class, and more.

Although public attention to these *-splain* forms has been robust (Waldman 2016; Doyle 2018; Tramontana 2020), there is a surprising lack of critical and scholarly discussion at the

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intersection of digital language practices, social media, and meaning making. In her article “Explaining ‘-*splain*’ in digital discourse”, Bridges (2021) attempts to address this gap in the literature to develop a more holistic understanding of how *-splain* variants operate in digital discourse. More specifically, Bridges examines a range of word formations ending in *-splain*, discussing how *-splain* comes to be used as a bound morpheme and the implications these complex forms have with regard to users’ perception of language use embedded in a web of sociolinguistic and (meta)pragmatic parameters.

In this short review essay, we present a reading of Bridges’ article which further develops some of her central arguments, drawing on our own previous work in this area (Lutzky and Lawson 2019). Our discussion is organised around three main concerns: linguistic prescriptivism, language policing and political correctness, and moral gradience. Our hope is to augment Bridges’ contribution to the literature, while identifying some of the emergent ideas in her article which we believe could be usefully expanded.

### Contextualising *-splain*

Before setting out the remainder of our response, it is first worthwhile describing the general mechanisms for how *-splain* forms function. In basic terms, this bound morpheme derives from the verb *explain* and represents a reduced pronunciation where its first syllable has been elided. The meaning that the bound morpheme conveys is related to its source in that it adds the semantic interpretation of ‘giving an explanation’ to a word formation, yet it is not completely neutral in its connotation. This is because words ending in *-splain* express a negative meaning, used as a strategy to comment on the fact that an explanation has been given on a specific topic, but also judge said explanation as inappropriate, for a range of reasons. As Merriam Webster (n.d.) highlights, the negative connotations surrounding *-splain* were likely already in motion before Solnit’s essay.

Bridges (2021) organizes the discussion of her data, collected from Twitter and Tumblr, in terms of socially relevant themes, focusing on four word creations: the forms *whitesplain* and *mansplain* criticise verbal behaviour based on the speaker’s race and gender respectively, while the forms *covidsplain* and *thinsplain* point out the speaker’s ignorance of specific topics, such as health and body image. Underpinning these terms is how they flag up an apparent disregard for people who are experts or who have experience in the field, with Bridges (2021: 4) pointing out that *-splain* words often convey annoyance with a speaker’s verbal behaviour, especially as it indicates lack of awareness regarding their interlocutor’s “cultural identity and/or knowledge”.

Words ending in *-splain* thus operate on two levels: they can be regarded as descriptive uses of the speech act of explaining (or justifying), as they identify the verbal behaviour of a specific social group (e.g. men, non-experts) as an example of this speech act. At the same time, they also metapragmatically comment on the use of this speech act as inappropriate in the respective context and show elements of the speech acts of accusing and requesting. This is because users of *-splain* variants implicitly accuse the speaker of having given an inappropriate explanation and call them out to account for it, possibly with a view to not repeating this behaviour in the future (see also Leone-Pizzighella 2021: 35). While Bridges (2021: 17) refers to *-splain* words as “multifunctional speech acts”, we could also view this phenomenon as an instance of lamination, with one speech act being laminated on top of another (Levinson 2017). They refer to someone’s

language use – the fact that they engage in the speech act of explaining – and at the same time accuse them of inappropriate verbal behaviour.

### Prescriptivism 2.0

The prescriptive approach to language use can be traced back to (at least) the eighteenth century, a period often referred to as the “Age of Prescriptivism” (Beal 2004: 105; Singh 2005: 177). As Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2019: 8–9) points out, however, the eighteenth century was, in reality, largely characterised by the process of codification, when language was being recorded in dictionaries and grammars. Prescriptivism only took off, in many ways, towards the end of the century, with the publication of the first guides focusing on what counted as correct language use. Looking at the contemporary context, though, we see that usage guides are becoming increasingly popular and diversified, with a variety of guidance published not only in books but also in language advice forums and on social media sites, leading Tieken-Boon van Ostade to conclude that the “Age of Prescriptivism” is actually now.

The link between linguistic prescriptivism and a contemporary discourse strategy like *-splain* might not be immediately obvious, but we suggest that *-splain* variants can be seen as a broader strategy of *discursive* prescriptivism. Extending this argument, the current “Age of Prescriptivism” is underlined by the extent to which people engage in online discussions of linguistic correctness by leaving comments in forums and other online platforms. This form of prescriptivism is largely driven by non-linguists, as linguists have mainly been advocating for the importance of descriptivism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and may be regarded as a type of bottom-up prescriptivism because it is “initiated by lay members of the general public” (Lukač 2018: 5). It is therefore aligned with a Citizen Sociolinguistics approach to the study of interactions – as adopted by Bridges (2021) – which explores topics of interest raised by “ordinary people” (Leone-Pizzighella 2021: 32; see also Rymes 2020), and differs from top-down prescriptivism (for example, of the kind implemented at an institutional level). In addition, this form of prescriptivism is associated in particular with digitally mediated communication. This seems to be mainly “[d]ue to the participatory appeal and the persistent nature of digital communication” (Heyd 2014: 490), which inspires users to voice their opinion on correct language use, especially with regard to language use in the digital sphere.

The productivity of *-splain*, as well as the framework of Citizen Sociolinguistics, could then be described as reflecting a new form of prescriptivism – what could be termed “prescriptivism 2.0”. This is because the type of prescriptive behaviour we encounter in words such as *whitesplain* or *mansplain* does not relate to the original focus of prescriptivism, that is how language is to be used correctly, which we still see reflected in contemporary studies of grassroots prescriptivism (see, for example, Drackley 2019 on orthographic reform in France). Instead, the type of prescriptivism we encounter here relates to speakers’ expectations with regard to sociolinguistic and pragmatic conventions and norms – who is allowed to say what in a specific context, while still being perceived as operating within the realms of what is considered appropriate. Thus, this “prescriptivism 2.0” is about policing language use on a higher level where contextual factors matter. It is a type of bottom-up or grassroots prescriptivism not driven by institutions but emerging to a considerable extent on social media, where users voice their opinion on what is and what is not allowed when it comes to human interaction.

## Language policing and political correctness

Moreover, prescriptivism 2.0 is politically inflected, in that *-splain* variants can also come to index a forthright declaration of liberal progressiveness, a challenge against hegemonically white cisheteronormative viewpoints, and an articulation of claimed political correctness (see also Fairclough 2003 for a broader discussion of discourse and political correctness). One explanation for why *-splain* variants have come to be so productive is that this bound morpheme acts as a shorthand and embeds within it a recognition (or a claim) that those who *-splain* overlook the structural and cultural advantages they might have, be that their race, gender, or appearance (Buerkle's 2019 analysis of 'hipster' masculinity, mansplaining, and social privilege is a useful reflection on some of these issues). Thus, critics of *-splaining* also weave into their utterances a form of social commentary, a rejection of a universalising (or objective) account of reality, and an acknowledgement that demographic characteristics do not entail claims to particular bodies of knowledge. Such multivalent strategies are especially useful in social media contexts, where common norms and frames of reference help build rapport and connection across disparate user groups as a form of shared social practice. Indeed, we can regard the epistemic ownership of discourses as one of the main tenets underlying the *-splain* phenomenon. Who gets to lay claim to expertise and knowledge?

Bridges (2021) touches on these issues of epistemic ownership by studying the themes previously noted: for example, race through the analysis of the word *whitesplain*, the precarious standing of expert knowledge through studying the form *covidsplain*, as well as social trends of body positivity and healthy living through examining the expression *thinsplain*. Each of these examples illustrates a specific concept of use with regard to words ending in *-splain*. The discussion of *whitesplain* is situated in the wider context of a digital call-out culture, where speakers call each other out for inappropriate (verbal) behaviour pertaining to race relations and the lived experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people. *Covidsplain* is related to the medical field, with particular reference to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shifting foundations of scientific knowledge and medical expertise, and discussed by Bridges (2021: 16) with reference to linguistic reflexivity and the metapragmatic nature of the form. *Thinsplain*, finally, is studied with regard to the epistemic ownership of discourses and speakers' epistemic authority to talk about certain social trends to do with weight, attractiveness, and health.

While dividing the discussion up in this way allows Bridges to focus on different theoretical frameworks and contexts, we think it is important to underline that all words ending in *-splain* share aspects of these frameworks and contexts. In other words, all of them are examples of linguistic creativity in that the productive morpheme *-splain* is used to create a new word denoting a new meaning. All of them are also metapragmatic in nature in that they comment on a speaker's language use.

Moreover, all of these are examples of linguistic gatekeeping, or attempts to "regulate or manage another's speech" (Bridges 2021: 19). Consequently, we see overlaps between prescriptivism 2.0 and language policing, what Bridges (2021: 19) defines as being "related to a larger cultural phenomenon of online behaviour of [sic] known as call-out culture". These call-outs are predicated on the fact that *-splainers'* claim to knowledge and expertise comes to be questioned and problematised by the targets of their contribution. In something of a paradox, *-splainers'* displays of claimed knowledge are not only argued to be patronising and condescending, they are ultimately positioned as uneducated and ignorant of nuance and detail. The interplay of the

different building blocks Bridges (2021) explores in her discussion of *-splain* formations highlights the need for further analysis to better understand how they are related to (and influence) one other, as well as to uncover their role in users' digital identity construction.

### Moral gradience

In our previous discussion, we established the importance of highlighting the similarities between *-splain* formations: they are a means of facilitating metapragmatic commentary, they function as a form of linguistic gatekeeping<sup>1</sup> within a larger call-out culture, and they establish claims with regard to epistemic ownership of discourses. As a final step in our response to Bridges' (2021) study of *-splain*, we will now focus on potential differences and how *-splain* variants might relate to expressions of moral gradience (see Kádár, Parvaresh and Ning 2019 for a related discussion of language and moral order). In fact, Bridges (2021: 22) touches on this point in her discussion of *thinsplain*, noting that her data show that "open expression of contempt for fat bodies is prevalent and even acceptable". She later goes on to explain that listeners and readers seem to be more receptive to the use of anti-fat language compared to examples of sexist or racist language use. While *thinsplaining* may be met with "a disapproving frown or chastising comment" (Bridges 2021: 22), it is often positioned as displaying a caring attitude and concern for others' wellbeing and the potential health effects of being over-weight, alongside a concordant assumption that low body weight is equivalent to good bodily health (itself often a point of contention, as debates about the efficacy of body mass index as a predictor of health suggest; see Nordqvist 2022).

Thus, it seems as if *thinsplaining* is perceived as being more acceptable than other *splainisms*, such as *mansplaining*, which itself, it could be argued, appears to be more harmless than *whitesplaining*, introducing a moral gradient along which these forms and their associated behaviours move. As problematic as all of these discourses are, then, some seem to have a higher level of acceptance or legitimacy. While *mansplaining* and *whitesplaining* could be seen as relating to expressions of sexism and racism respectively, *thinsplaining* is packaged up with expressing anxieties about the negative health effects of being overweight and is seen as something of a reasonable moral imperative, thus giving it more social currency. All of these terms are correspondingly based on the concept of privilege, whether that is the privilege of being thin, the privilege of being male, or the privilege of being white (or some combination thereof). Consequently, they bring attention to underlying discourses of body-shaming, sexism and racism, typically from a (thin) white heteronormative stance. That said, we would question the extent to which *thinsplaining* is, as Bridges (2021: 23) argues, part of a wider strategy of left-wing political discourse and would suggest that this interpretation requires more substantive corroboration than is currently presented in the existing analytical account.

### Conclusion

In closing her article, Bridges (2021: 25) argues that "a fuller understanding must be broadened beyond discussion of *splains* as just words". We have attempted to engage with this invitation, extending the scope of discussion to include a deliberation of how *-splain* variants encapsulate

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<sup>1</sup> While the established term is 'linguistic gatekeeping', as also used by Bridges (2021), the nature of *-splain* formations would possibly justify the introduction of a new term, such as 'communicative gatekeeping', which highlights the interlocutors' communicative behaviour as inappropriate rather than their linguistic expression.

discourses of knowledge, as well as how they might be understood as a new form of prescriptivism, an expression of linguistic policing, and a substantiation of moral gradience. Ultimately, it is clear that there is much more going on with *-splain* variants than might be originally thought and there is persuasive evidence to suggest that it adds to the communicative repertoire of online discourse.

As useful as the fine-grained attention on the different forms of *-splain* might be, though, we would advise caution about drawing any firm conclusions, especially given the very small sample size set out in Bridges' article and that only a handful of examples are selected for discussion. Furthermore, as Bridges (2021: 23) acknowledges, the US-centric nature of the data means it is difficult to extrapolate to other contexts. Larger-scale analyses would certainly go some way towards bolstering the accounts presented, while data collected from outside the USA would allow us to examine how far cross-cultural differences might affect the (meta)pragmatic meanings of *-splain* variants. Do *-splain* variants operate differently in the UK, for example? How are they used in multilingual contexts? And to what extent do they retain (or subvert) the kind of communicative intents identified by Bridges? We hope that future research into these terms engages with these questions (and more), further contributing to our understanding of how this novel and productive linguistic form operates.

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