



Languaging in the age of Meta: On Judith Bridges' "Explaining *-splain* in digital discourse"

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Abstract. Judith Bridges' analysis of *-splain* discourse illustrates the slipperiness of language in the age of Twitter, microblogging, and cancel culture and helps explain why having meaningful public discourse seems increasingly difficult. *X-splaining* is a form of epistemic injustice. I suggest that, barring a Humpty-Dumpty theory of meaning, attempts to recontextualize neologisms like *mansplain* to make them antonyms of their original meanings should be seen as *misuses*. Moreover, *-splain* terms creatively and conveniently compress multiple meanings into one, but can also function to cut off dialogue, making it harder to hold speakers accountable for their claims.

Keywords: Metapragmatics, polysemy, neologisms, epistemic injustice, normativity, recontextualization

Judith Bridges takes on the challenging task of examining the metapragmatics of the suffix *-splain* in microblog discourse—an ephemeral and constantly shifting semantic space. She offers an insightful analysis of the bound morpheme that is “used to call attention to, label, and evaluate the pragmatics of someone else’s language” (Bridges 2021, 2). Semantically, it communicates “annoyance” at what the speaker has said and how they said it and “can serve to accuse a speaker of obliviousness or ignorance, and of devaluing voices that speak from a position of epistemic validity” (p. 2).

Bridges traces the origin of *-splain* to Rebecca Solnit’s (2008) blog use of “mansplain,” but it is worth noting that, though she identified the phenomenon now known as mansplaining, Solnit

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herself did not coin the term and apparently is (or was) not a fan of it (Lewis 2014),¹ a point to which I will return. The suffix has since been used in a wide range of other contexts to form portmanteaux such as “whitesplain,” “thinsplain,” and even “finsplain” (in reference to explaining financial matters)—recently spotted in an ad for a financial planning service on the New York subway. What strikes me as especially interesting is how Bridges’ analysis illustrates the particular slipperiness of language in the age of Twitter, microblogging, and cancel culture. In fact, her analysis helps explain why it seems increasingly difficult to have meaningful public discourse. While one of the things that makes Bridges’ analysis fascinating is her focus on what she dubs “metapragmatic neology,” *-splain* terms are not merely a matter of linguistic creativity in the service of linguistic policing; they are themselves liable to be contested terms. This is not surprising since *-splain*ing is all about denying someone else’s epistemic authority.

Nicole Dular, whom Bridges cites in passing, offers a detailed analysis of mansplaining as a form of epistemic injustice, which she then generalizes to all forms of *X-splain*ing. Although Dular’s analysis does not use Bridges’ metapragmatic framework, hers is also a metapragmatic analysis in the sense that she, too, views *-splain* expressions as struggles over appropriate language use and as manifestations of linguistic reflexivity. The very accusation of *X-splain*ing is a contestation of a speaker’s legitimate status as a knower, i.e. someone with legitimate standing as an explainer. The status of the knowledge at issue need not be in question (though it can be); the primary target of the accusation is the speaker’s epistemic authority *and* their undermining of someone else’s epistemic authority, someone who—from the perspective of the accuser—is in fact better qualified to speak on the topic.

On Dular’s account, *X-splain*ing is “a dysfunctional subversion of epistemic roles (hearer/receiver of knowledge and speaker/giver of knowledge in a testimonial exchange) due to the operation of a prejudicial identity stereotype” (Dular 2021, 12). In the case of mansplaining, the gendered prejudicial stereotype is that women are not qualified knowers—even if they are experts on the topic at hand, together with the stereotype that men, including the speaker/mansplainer, *are* qualified knowers—even if they know little or nothing about it. Interestingly, on Bridges’ analysis, the *-splain* accusers *also* rely on stereotypes (“people like Josh,” p. 23). Bridges uses the notions of *enregisterment* and *indexicality* to shed light on how the various forms of *-splain* become socially recognized ways of speaking associated with certain types of speakers or groups (second order indexicality) or rise to the level of sociolinguistic stereotypes (third order indexicality) (p. 5). I would have liked to see this part of her argument spelled out in more detail. How, for example, is the second-order macro-sociological type of modern-day feminist linked to “social justice movements and the diverse sociopolitical beliefs that exist about feminists and activists” (p. 5)? Bridges argues that *-splain* neologisms do identity work. I think she is right about that; however, to the extent that this identity work tends to be homogenizing, that may be a problem with these neologisms. Given precisely the diversity of sociopolitical beliefs about feminism, the “type” of modern-day feminist will presumably be hard to pin down and will—at minimum—be polysemic. (This is one reason why we often find feminist literature referring to *feminisms* rather than to feminism.)

Unlike Bridges’ sociolinguistic account, the point of which is to describe rather than to police how users are “languaging,” as Bridges’ and others have put it, Dular’s characterization of

¹ According to *Know Your Meme*, the phrase was first used in a comment on *LiveBlog*, went viral, and was submitted to *Urban Dictionary* in 2009 (“Mansplaining” n.d.).

X-splaining is explicitly normative: *X-splaining* is a form of epistemic injustice based on a “*dysfunctional* subversion” of the speaker and hearer’s epistemic roles. There could presumably be non-dysfunctional subversions, cases where interlocutors realize that they misjudged their epistemic roles, say. In contrast, *X-splaining* is a form of “degradation by way of denying [another’s] epistemic autonomy as a rational agent” (Dular 2021, 16). The *X-splainer*, in turn, claims authority not based on epistemic merit, but based on their identity. This is a form of epistemic arrogance (a phrase Dular takes from José Medina), and it is up to men and other *X-splainers* to curb their arrogance. Dular writes:

[W]hen one is in a conversational exchange with a member of a marginalized group, one should, first, ramp down one’s confidence in one’s own comparative expertise on the subject so to treat the issue of epistemic arrogance, and, second, instead of presupposing that one is entitled to occupy the role of speaker, presuppose that one is the hearer in this conversational exchange unless proven otherwise. However, this is the ideal solution, which will undoubtedly take much time to be realized, if it ever is. In the meantime, members of marginalized groups who suffer from acts of ‘splaining have each other to use as resources. Although reasserting oneself alone as the rightful speaker to a mansplainer is bound to be ineffective, finding solidarity in others reaffirming this reassertion is one strategy that is likely more effective. (Dular 2021, 20)

Unfortunately, the curbing of arrogance does not seem to be very common in the blogosphere. And, paradoxically perhaps, the use of *-splain* terms may partly explain why, or at least be a contributing factor. I noted earlier that Solnit and others are not enamored of the term “mansplain.” The reason is that it can cut off the potential for dialogue. Bridges’ own analysis suggests that identifying *-splaining* behaviors is associated with wokeness—and that can be or be seen as a manifestation of a certain kind of arrogance.

Another fascinating feature of *-splain* is that, according to Bridges, it can be used to mean the contrary of its original meaning. She writes, “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” (p. 4). This apparent semantic reversal is worth investigating further. Bridges explains it in terms of the mechanisms of *entextualization* and recontextualization: that is, a bit of language can be taken out of its original setting and “recontextualized in its new discursive sites and therefore embedded with new meanings” (p. 15). Bridges seems to take this embedding *ipso facto* to *imbue* the term with new meaning. Familiar examples of these processes are terms like “gay” or “queer;” these were (and in some contexts continue to be) derogatory terms which have been reappropriated and successfully revalorized by LGBTQ+ communities. However, the appropriations of *-splain* terms or “canceling,” or, before all that, “political correctness”² strike me as different. Using “mansplain” to refer to a woman silencing a man—presumably unjustly—seems to be not a mere appropriation and semantic shift to mean the converse, but rather a *misappropriation* or *misuse* of the term. Are there legitimate grounds to make this normative claim?

Bridges writes:

² The latter term was originally introduced by a Black speaker, then appropriated by conservatives so that it now carries predominantly negative connotations.

[*M*]ansplain 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. [...] e.g. "#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. (p. 19)

What matters to Bridges is that, regardless of "the users' viewpoints on the word or the debates it provokes," the term gets users to think metapragmatically about their and others' language use and interactional behavior. However, more can be said here. I'm intrigued by the phrase "users' viewpoints on the word." Is that something other than what they mean by the word? Is there room for semantic normativity here? Are those using the term to refer to women silencing men not *misusing* the term? Should they perhaps use the term "womansplain"? Who is doing the weaponizing? I agree with Bridges that the speaker is dismissing the feminist critique of some men's speech, but would add that by trying to subvert the meaning of "mansplain," he is being, perhaps deliberately, obfuscatory. Or does raising these questions simply amount to engaging in language policing oneself?

In the case of the male user replying critically to tweets on *manels and meninars*, it does not seem to be quite the case that he is taking *mansplain* to be a word used by women to silence men ("#Feminism is basically a bunch of gals thinking up new words like: #Manspreading #manterrupt #mansplaining Oh and blaming men for all their troubles"). There is no reference to the meaning of the terms at all, nor does the user claim to be silenced by those feminist "gals." Rather, he seems to be rejecting all blame for sexism while being sexist ("gals"). The tweet itself is a form of mansplaining! It is indeed, as Bridges says, an instance of language policing by way of *not* recognizing terms like *mansplain* as legitimately meaningful. Arguably, this is a paradigmatic case of trolling.

The fact that we are dealing with neologisms makes this issue even more acute: a neologism cannot be right or wrong. Rather, following J. L. Austin, we might say it either does or does not have uptake (Austin 1975). Nor, one might argue, do these neologisms have a sufficiently long history of use to render using it as an antonym of the original use a misuse. Add to that the fact that terms can have different meanings in different linguistic (sub-)communities, and the very notion of meaning is at risk. Trollers and contemporary social media discourse more broadly seem to be flirting with, if not relying on, a Humpty-Dumpty theory of meaning (Davidson 2005).

Humpty-Dumpty famously tells Alice that his words ("There's glory for you!") mean whatever he wants them to mean ("There's a nice knock-down argument for you!"). Are cases of using terms as antonyms of their original meanings instances of Humpty-Dumptyism or ignorance (willful or otherwise)? If it is Humpty-Dumptyism, if, in other words, a speaker believes they need not be accountable to semantic norms and may dictate what the expressions they use mean at will, this undermines discourse in cases of disagreement. (This point constitutes a critique of intentionalist theories of meaning). If these are cases of ignorance, then it is possible,

at least in principle, for interlocutors to reach agreement about the meaning of their terms and engage in meaningful discourse.

Bridges does not endorse a Humpty-Dumpty view of meaning. She believes that “linguistic creativity is social, not individual” (p. 17). More could be said about what exactly this means. Her emphasis seems to be on the fact that users do not cut neologisms from whole cloth, but “rearticulate and repurpose discourse from other contexts to achieve objectives that are important to them...” (p. 17). In other words, they are drawing on publicly available meanings. In addition, I would suggest, language users can also be held accountable to such meanings and norms of discourse.

Let me return to something I noted earlier. In her review of Solnit’s *Men Explain Things to Me* (Solnit 2014), Helen Lewis notes that she, like Solnit, is not a fan of the term “mansplaining” because “You don’t fight being patronised by patronising others in return” (Lewis 2014). Perhaps it is worth considering that those claiming that being accused of *X-splaining* is a form of being (unjustly) silenced are not entirely wrong. Recall that both the presumed *-splainer* and the accuser rely on stereotypes. Moreover, Bridges ties the use of *-splain* not only to people’s language practices, but also their ideologies. However, it seems that because the second- and third-order indexing appeal to stereotypes, the resulting identities and ideologies are homogenizing and encourage users to make sometimes unwarranted assumptions about their interlocutors. As a result, both the *-splainer* and the accuser are at risk of misjudging their interlocutor. It is not clear, for instance, that users in the exchange about the Central Park Karen case cited on pages 15–16, are trying to upend the epistemic roles of speaker and hearer, that they are in fact white- or mansplaining, but they get shut down quite forcefully. Furthermore, many if not all of the exchanges Bridges cites are combative and dismissive in nature (*-splain* conveys annoyance, after all). The *-splain* terms function as a quick shorthand, but they are liable to cut off dialogue.

Bridges notes that “linguistic creativity, such as wordplay via *-splaining*, and *man-* words [...] expediently and cleverly compress multiple meanings into one, providing labels for previously unnamed social phenomena” (p. 18). This compression is, on the one hand, highly effective at communicating rich meanings, but, on the other hand, impedes our ability to figure out what exactly a speaker means. How are we to know which background understanding a speaker actually aims to activate? To be sure, speakers, as Judith Butler (1997) among others has argued, and contrary to the Humpty-Dumpty theory of meaning, do not have ultimate control over how others interpret their utterances and hence over what their utterances mean; meaning construction, after all, is a social affair. At the same time, in the absence of being able to reject *some* semantic interpretations of a term as misuses, meaningful discourse becomes increasingly difficult. The rapidity with which new terms are appropriated and, dare I say, sometimes *misappropriated* seems to be one—though certainly not the only—reason for that. For when interlocutors cannot agree on the meaning of those terms, meaningful debate is undermined and may become impossible.

These issues, of course, extend beyond microblogs and have real-life implications. As Bridges points out, “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 [...] websites and social media content have an increasing influence on how we communicate and the way we understand how others communicate” (p. 8). Might these same affordances and limitations also change what theories

of meaning we ought to endorse? Bridges is without doubt right that digital communication affects “IRL” communication. I do not wish to argue that that effect is entirely negative, but I do want to raise some concerns about the instability of online discourse affecting precisely what methods of communication are available to us, how we express our views, and how we understand others and how they communicate. And the real-life implications go beyond how we communicate. Consider the ongoing debate over Critical Race Theory—another term whose meaning has been subjected to the processes of entextualization and recontextualization and weaponized by conservatives. Because they have given the term a non-standard and ill-defined meaning, critique of their position becomes more difficult. It requires debate over meanings as well as actual educational policy. Yet microblog discourse does not allow for extended thoughtful exchanges. The very features and affordances that promote some of the linguistic creativity curtail the possibilities of actual discourse in the Habermasian sense. Habermas’s theory of communicative action (1998) holds that understanding an utterance requires understanding its conditions of acceptability, which means knowing the reasons that can be used, if called upon, to back up the claims raised in the utterance. Given that microblogs do not seem to allow room for this kind of accountability (*-splaining* is used as a short-hand that is not seen as in need of unpacking), microblog discourse may raise questions about the validity of this kind of theory of meaning.

Can a neologism be too successful? Let me close by returning to the “finsplain” example. To finsplain, presumably, is to give financial advice when one doesn’t really know what one is talking about—unlike the advertiser. The ad suggests that you don’t want the financial advice of someone who is not a competent knower; you should turn to the company who put up the ad instead. It also exploits the fact that, as Bridges notes, *-splain* is designed to attract attention to the speaker or blogger or, in this case, advertiser. It also does some of the identity work Bridges discusses: the company aligns itself with a certain kind of “woke” crowd. Yet in the context of an ad, the normative connotations of *-splain* seem to be entirely defanged, the term reduced to amusing and eye-catching cleverness.

The lesson of Bridges’ fascinating study may ultimately be about the inherent instability and fluidity of language. It raises questions not only about what makes a neologism stick and what doesn’t, but also about when we can claim that attempts to recontextualize words and thereby imbue them with new meaning might be not mere appropriations, but misappropriations.

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