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## 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 utterance<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> *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’”).

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>3</sup> 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 Science<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>4</sup> 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,<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup> 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"<sup>6</sup>. These comments bring up the notion of *entextualization*, which, like *resemiotization*, is central to the potential of social media to

<sup>6</sup> 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 users<sup>7</sup> 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:

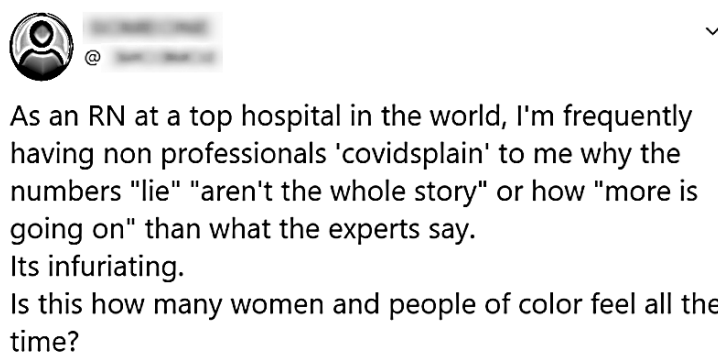


Figure 3. From Twitter. "Covidsplain to an RN [Registered Nurse]"

<sup>7</sup> 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*<sup>8</sup>. Their popularity in social

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<sup>8</sup> *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,<sup>9</sup> 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

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<sup>9</sup> 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:

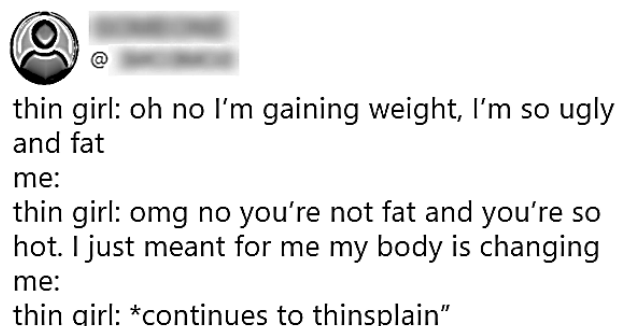


Figure 4. Twitter. *What thin girls say.*

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.

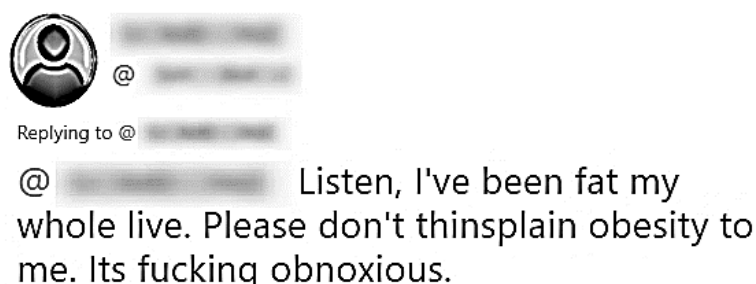


Figure 5. Twitter. *Don't thinsplain obesity.*

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:

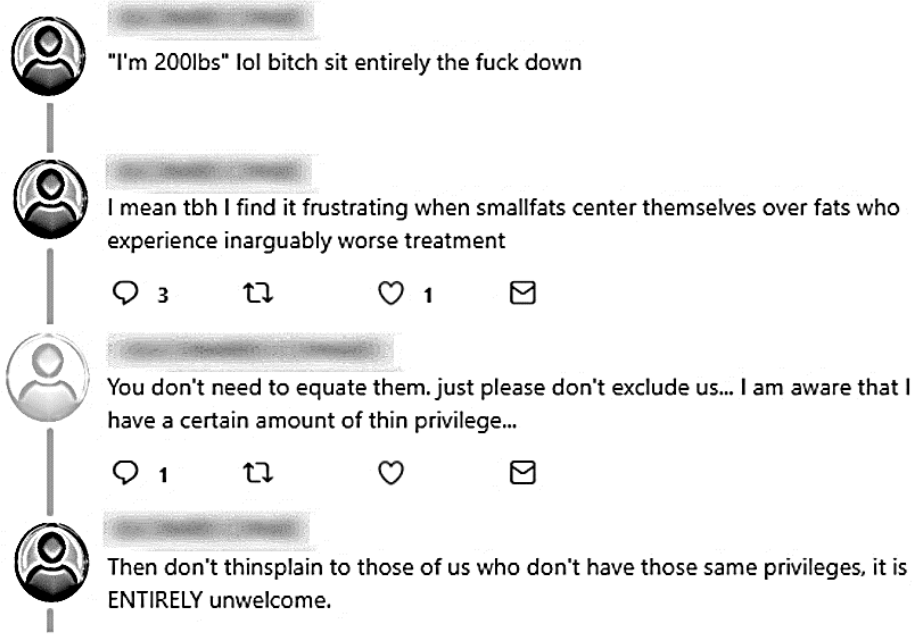


Figure 6. Dialogue with a “smallfat”

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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## The evolution of *-splain* terms and the spirit of Citizen Sociolinguistics: A note on methods

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**Abstract.** I situate Bridges's study of *-splain* and its social outgrowths and implications within the framework of Rymesian Citizen Sociolinguistics, offering clarity on the methodological differences between this approach and other approaches that have been conflated with it. I agree with Bridges's addition of critical discourse analysis and neology to the Citizen Sociolinguistics method and with her use of metapragmatics to shed light on the emergence of new personae associated with the weaponization of (man)splain and its associated call-out culture.

**Keywords:** citizen sociolinguistics, metapragmatics, participant agency, digital discourse, research methods

### 1. The ethos of the Citizen Sociolinguistics method

Bridges's (2021) work on the metapragmatics of *-splain* terms is an excellent and true-to-form application of the Citizen Sociolinguistics "mindset" and methods. Citizen Sociolinguistics has been adopted by many researchers around the world at this point, but it is difficult to find work like Bridges's which taps into the ethos of the method as originally conceived by Betsy Rymes (2014). Importantly, Bridges does not treat Citizen Sociolinguistics as a crowd-sourced sociolinguistic investigation, nor does she conflate it with the research on language attitudes often used in Folk Linguistics. The data for her work are the everyday interactions that people are having, of their own accord, online and 'IRL' (in real life), and the emergent and constantly changing ideologies associated with them. Her work helps academics find a means of decoding these complex and widely dispersed interactions via tools and terms that we understand (e.g., discourse analysis and metapragmatics) so that we may understand them better, *not* to draw conclusions about the phenomena being discussed by the citizens so that academics can decide what is "really" going on.

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Since Rymes & Leone (2014) likened Citizen Sociolinguistics to Citizen Science *in part*, many scholars have adopted the term ‘Citizen Sociolinguistics’ to refer to Citizen Science projects that have a sociolinguistic focus. Some have also conflated Citizen Sociolinguistics and Folk Linguistics, treating them as one and the same. However, there are only minor points of overlap across these three methods—and much more significant differences—which I find are opportune to review here.

*1a. Citizens and folk: same population, different paradigm*

Citizen Sociolinguistics, Citizen Science, and Folk Linguistics all have in common that they rely on the participation of non-experts, or so-called ordinary people<sup>1</sup>. The use of the term “citizen” as opposed to “folk” calls to mind the *agentive involvement* of these ordinary people in the discovery of topics that are also of interest in the academy. In this sense, Citizen Science and Citizen Sociolinguistics stand apart from Folk Linguistics in that the former two tend to conceive of ordinary people as being entirely capable of reasoning about issues related to the research and drawing conclusions that are taken seriously by the experts. This choice of terminology coalesces with the concept of citizenship as described by Stroud (2001) in his work on linguistic citizenship. That is, citizenship invokes a sense of ‘belonging’ as well as equal rights, access, and protection, and bringing “different ways of ‘knowing’” into public discourse (p. 345). Folk Linguistics, on the other hand, aims to uncover an “underlying folk theory” (Preston 2005, p. 1) that complements linguists’ prevailing theories. Preston stresses the utility of engagement with the folk, but laments that “folk knowledge is so minimal and addresses so few linguistic concerns (and many of these inaccurately), and ... many things of linguistic interest are completely hidden from the folk” (Preston 2005, p. 3). In other words, all of these approaches value the perspective of ordinary people, but they orient to it in starkly different ways.

Another way of summarizing these differences is with a model from ethnomethodology<sup>2</sup>. Drawing from the seminal work of Harold Garfinkel, it could be argued that some types of sociolinguistic investigation treat the participant as a “cultural dope,” or as “man-in-sociologist’s-society” who lacks reflexivity and follows the norms of the common culture (Garfinkel 1964, p. 244). This risks occurring in sociological and sociolinguistic inquiry when the researcher “simplif[ies] the communicative texture of [the participant’s] behavioral environment” (p. 247) rather than observing how the participant actually navigates social life on his/her own terms. Folk Linguistics often does this by relying on abstract representations of language, for instance by using dialect maps to solicit reflections from participants on the state of a given language/dialect. This of course prompts a focus on regionalisms, dialects, and their interrelatedness rather than on linguistic differences linked to social class, race, gender, social domains, age, interests or any number of other factors which might be more relevant to the participants. On the other hand, the “culturally astute agent” (Lynch 2012, p. 224) is “active, skilful, interpretive, and reflexive,” capable of monitoring their own actions while they act (Pleasants 1998, p. 18). This is the framework that is used in Citizen Sociolinguistics, which is

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<sup>1</sup> My use here of the term “ordinary people” does not in any way connote their lesser intelligence or simple-mindedness. Rather, it refers to those individuals who have not had formal training in (socio)linguistics or its related disciplines.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for their suggestion to include ethnomethodology in this discussion. Garfinkel’s work was a fundamental building block in Rymes’s early work in Citizen Sociolinguistics.



facilitated by ethnographic observation and analysis of discourse in spaces where there are no prompts generated by the linguist. More on this below.

*1b. Crowd-sourcing and surveys vs. agency and wonderment*

The question of agency, as mentioned above, is crucial in setting Citizen Sociolinguistics apart from both Citizen Science and Folk Linguistics. In fact, it is precisely the *vox populi* which generates the topics of interest for Citizen Sociolinguistics (such as the *-splain* phenomenon). Citizen Science and Folk Linguistics treat the participation of non-experts as supplemental to and reliant on that of experts, whereas Citizen Sociolinguistics puts the activities of ordinary people *in primis*, with the work of the resident expert hinging entirely on the activities of ordinary people. Further, in Citizen Sociolinguistics, the curiosity or “wonderment” of ordinary people must exist prior to any other aspects of the analysis (Rymes 2020a). In Citizen Sociolinguistics, similar to in ethnography, we dive into a pool of discourse and semiotic data that has been organically generated by ordinary people and we begin to dig through it without necessarily intervening in the way that knowledge is produced or shared. In Citizen Science and Folk Linguistics, instead, the non-expert participants are tasked with answering questions assigned by the research team and/or using the research team’s parameters to do so. In Citizen Sociolinguistics, one must wait and see what emerges as important or interesting to ordinary people from their conversations ‘in the wild’, whereas Citizen Science and Folk Linguistics take a more structured approach, deciding which topics are explored via which tools and under which conditions.

In light of these differences, Citizen Sociolinguistics has in recent years split into two camps, as described by Svendsen (2018). One approach might be called the Rymesian school and the other the Citizen Science school. The differences between these camps are many, but the one crucial point to be made is that Citizen Sociolinguistics as coined and conceptualized by Betsy Rymes (2014; see also Rymes and Leone 2014) is *driven by* the citizens themselves, *not* by a research institute or an academic researcher. This means that Citizen Sociolinguistics “projects” lack an organizing agent and therefore may be much more chaotic and volatile than traditional Citizen Science projects, which are centrally controlled. However, the centrally-controlled model from Citizen Science has been carried over to many research projects calling themselves “Citizen Sociolinguistics” because—I presume—they are more palatable to funding organizations this way. The Citizen Science model favors the formation of a clear objective identified by the experts, a clear timeline established by the institute, and a clear division of labor via the delegation of tasks to ‘citizens’, rather than an unpredictable timeline, intermittent participation, and a wait-and-see approach for the ultimate focus of the project (as is sometimes the case with Citizen Sociolinguistics).

Of course, there is nothing intrinsically problematic about linguists or other scientists relying on a more structured approach, or on dialect maps or surveys to dig deeper into the specific linguistic phenomena they are interested in. The benefit of these approaches is that researchers can decide how broad and how deep they need to go into a given investigation and can then stop when they get there, whereas Citizen Sociolinguistics is oftentimes reliant on how much intrigue a given topic has and how much discussion it can elicit based on wonderment alone. However, a very strong point of Citizen Sociolinguistics is that it is not limited to the questions that the scientists themselves think to ask; it allows for a plurality (even a cacophony!)

of perspectives and voices which may even read as unreliable or contradictory (see Moore 2015). Together, however, this plurality of accounts—each crafted for different purposes, different audiences—creates what John L. Jackson calls a “flat ethnography, where you slice into a world from different perspectives, scales, registers, and angles—all distinctively useful, valid, and worthy of consideration” (2013, pp. 16–17).

## 2. *-Splain* as driven by the wonderment of citizens

Bridges’s study falls, I believe, into the Rymesian school in that she came across *-splain* terms just like the rest of the world did, watching their development over time as both a participant in the circles where these terms were used and as a discourse analyst. Importantly, as she has noted in this paper, the terms, their use, and the ideologies and personae associated with their use have continued to morph over time and create the foundations for new and related terms and concepts (e.g., “Karen” and “Chad”), which could not have been predicted by anyone, let alone by an expert potentially guiding the project and delegating tasks to non-expert volunteers. Out of necessity, Bridges has stayed engaged with the branches of meaning growing out of *-splain* terms and has been able to link discourses around *-splain* to a growing web of meaning around social and sociolinguistic phenomena.

Bridges’s label of her work as “critical citizen digital discourse analysis” (2021, p. 9) serves to further situate her work at the nexus of several fields, highlighting the value it adds to the fields of socio- and applied linguistics. Metapragmatics has always been a fundamental component of Citizen Sociolinguistics (Rymes 2014, Rymes & Leone 2014) and Bridges deploys this framework fruitfully in the exploration of *-splain* terms and their metapragmatic functions. Critical discourse analysis also seems an inevitable addition to Citizen Sociolinguistic research, in that both methods focus on the ways that linguistic practice impacts social practice and vice versa. She uses this critical discourse analysis approach to examine how neology (usually a product of citizens’ language use) both reflects changes in our social worlds and enregisters new ways of understanding existing social phenomena (e.g., “Karens” and their “can-I-speak-to-the-manager haircuts”, 2021, p. 5) (Agha 2003).

As Bridges points out, despite what are presumably the best academic and ethical intentions of researchers using Citizen Sociolinguistics, “What is lacking in Citizen Sociolinguistics is observing how people draw *their own* connections between what they see happening in language at the macro-level and the broader social ideologies that those patterns contribute to” (p. 10, emphasis added). Indeed, this is where Citizen Sociolinguistics gets blurry in terms of where the line is drawn between “us” and “them”. Initiatives to use Citizen Sociolinguistics in schools, for instance, involve students and teachers as citizen sociolinguists who do research on/with other citizen sociolinguists both online and IRL. Expertise is relative, and who’s “driving the bus” in Citizen Sociolinguistic research is constantly changing. Many times, in projects with schools for instance, citizens are precisely the ones who are drawing conclusions and making connections about their own and others’ linguistic practice (Diggitt, 2020; Rymes 2014, 2020a, 2020b) and the institutionally-backed researchers are simply reporting these findings and providing an additional framework for thinking about them in terms appreciated by the academy. That said, Citizen Sociolinguistics has as a goal the dispersion of information and “findings” back to the citizens themselves rather than a final project destined for the ivory tower. Following the uptake and re-uptake of Citizen Sociolinguistic research is critical to the

method itself, and Bridges has done this beautifully with the *-splain* phenomenon by following the development of the terms, articles published about them, tweets about those articles, etc.

### 3. Some thoughts about how *-splain* terms work and what they do

As Bridges asserts, labeling an utterance as X-splaining or a speaker as an X-splainer “serves to accuse those speakers of devaluing the voices that speak from a position of epistemic validity” (2021, p. 19). In other words, the goal of the accuser is to call the speaker’s right to speak, or their authority, into question by invoking the relevant *-splain* term. While this definition doesn’t require or even imply that the speaker and the accuser *not* share the *-splain*-relevant identity, it seems that this is often the case. The topics that are X-splained are also related to the identity of the *-splainer* with respect to the accuser. In fact, these topics are partially what seem to cement the speaker’s identity as a *-splainer* in the context of that utterance. The interesting exception is the original term, *mansplain*, for which any topic seems to be available for mansplaining. I have hypothesized the following as possible (made-up) accusations of *-splained* topics, with possible speaker identities when relevant, for the sake of illustration:

- **Men\* *mansplain* to non-men\*\*** [about anything they feel they have more authority on than the non-man addressee]
  - \* Who is in this category? (e.g., Do mansplainers have to be cisgender males?)
  - \*\* Who is in this category?
    - e.g., “Don’t mansplain childbirth to me [a mother]”
    - e.g., “Don’t mansplain block chain technology to me [a non-man computer scientist]”
    - e.g., “Don’t mansplain gender reassignment surgery to me [a transgender person]”
    - e.g., “Don’t mansplain reproductive rights to me” [a person who can become pregnant]
- **White people *whitesplain* to non-white people** [about race and racism]
  - e.g., “Don’t whitesplain police brutality to me”
  - e.g., “Don’t whitesplain how to be an ally to me”
- **Thin people *thinsplain* to non-thin people** [about weight, health, and exercise]
  - e.g., “Don’t thinsplain hypothyroidism to me”
  - e.g., “Don’t thinsplain body positivity to me”
- **Rich people *richsplain* to non-rich people** [about finances]
  - e.g., “Don’t richsplain food stamps to me”
  - e.g., “Don’t richsplain your 401k to me”
- **Covid-truthers/deniers *covidsplain* to Covid-compliers** [about Covid/vaccine conspiracies]
  - e.g., “Don’t covidsplain the 5G vaccine to me”
  - e.g., “Don’t covidsplain to me why you’re not wearing a mask”

While all of these utterances are possible and could logically be considered instances of *-splaining*, will they all likely be seen as such? What content is X-ish enough to warrant a

call-out, and in what context? Who decides who is X enough to be called an X-splainer? Who is non-X enough that they can make that accusation? Do X-splainers embrace their X identity in the context of the explanation, or is it always something attributed to them by the accuser? How many existing tools for understanding interaction can we reasonably apply to analyzing the (digital) contexts in which this discourse occurs, and which are decidedly too limited or outdated? While Grice's maxims (1989) and Austin's perlocutionary force (1975) came to mind while reading about *-splain* and its functions, I'm not sure that they can account for all of its layers. We need a "doubly metapragmatic" (Bridges 2017, p. 94) lens in order to understand the reaches of this phenomenon and other related ones.

One extension of the *-splain* phenomenon which is illuminated by the doubly metapragmatic lens is the weaponization of "mansplain." While the term was originally developed to label a specific utterance by a man that eclipses women's voices, the term has now been weaponized to do the reverse: silence men. As Bridges states, "If we want to understand how cultural values towards sociopolitical matters are constructed and how they evolve, attention to any individual's viewpoint on the matter is just as important as how they are discussed by experts or academics or magazines" (2021, p. 24). And even if that viewpoint comes from a "Chad"—perhaps *especially* if it comes from a "Chad"—the *ethos* of Citizen Sociolinguistics says we need to consider it. One of the beautiful and terrifying things about the internet is that there are no barriers to publication, there is no review process, and that gatekeeping is fairly lax. The words we encounter in social media environments are often contradictory, offensive, conspiratorial, and unreliable, but this is what makes it so interesting to follow the evolution and development of terms, how they are fleshed out, what domains they occupy, what type of status they take up, and how they get co-opted or elevated for other purposes: thanks to following the trail of breadcrumbs left by all of this digital language mediation, we can really see how the collective actions of individuals are creating social and linguistic change.

#### 4. Some final thoughts

As a final observation about Bridges's application of Citizen Sociolinguistics, I would like to praise her for using pseudonyms of usernames that are technically public domain, and for recognizing the power dynamic that exists between researchers and citizen sociolinguists, even if it is something that would eventually be nice to democratize and neutralize. In the early days of Citizen Sociolinguistics, the Institutional Review Board and other codes of ethics allowed for the use of usernames because much of the data we were drawing from was publicly accessible (e.g., on YouTube, both in videos and in the comments sections). I can't speak for others, but in my own earlier work with Citizen Sociolinguistics, it seemed like the democratic thing to do was to attribute great observations about language to the actual person who made them, via their username. However, despite wanting to treat "internet people" as real contributors to research, we need to be wary of doing so without their explicit consent. Since this early research began in 2013/2014, a lot has changed on the Internet (e.g., Twitter went public in 2014 and increased its user base from 200 million in 2013 to almost 400 million in 2021) and there is a greater risk of context collapse as social media accounts become associated with one another and as we share more and more of our lives online. Taking this into consideration, I would urge other researchers using Citizen Sociolinguistics methods to use pseudonyms as well (or to get the explicit consent of the person to use their username).

However, regardless of whether they are attributed direct credit or not, listening to citizens' observations about language as well as their own metapragmatic reflections about social and sociolinguistic phenomena is critical to doing informed and relevant sociolinguistic research today because it forces linguists to orient seriously to the general public and what the public is doing with language. What the people find interesting and what the academy deems important sometimes vary immensely, even filtering into the ways we allow ourselves as academics to approach a research topic. For instance, many of what are arguably the most fascinating parts of William Labov's works in variationist sociolinguistics were relegated to the footnotes! Why would Labov leave the most interesting bits of information (of course, a matter of opinion) out of the actual analysis? Perhaps it is because only certain types of data were considered worthwhile or legitimate in the context of a publication for a peer-reviewed journal, even though those same data may have had a massive appeal beyond that format (indeed, it was always my favorite part of his work as a graduate student).

A cornerstone of Citizen Sociolinguistics is that reporting back *only* to a professional community of like-minded academics is no longer the ideal—rather, findings and analyses that add to the conversations already happening among citizens should be made available to them, too. That way, citizens themselves can take them up or leave them, which recycles the work of academics back into the community for further commentary. Bridges does this here by publishing her work in an Open Access journal like *Language Under Discussion*. Many others, such as Betsy Rymes, keep a blog (<https://citizensociolinguistics.com>). What is for certain is that the 'silliness', 'worthlessness', and 'contemptibility' of *-splain* terms (Bridges 2021, p. 25) is precisely what keeps them in circulation, and is what keeps people talking about them and using them. It is my hope that Citizen Sociolinguistics will continue to engage the public in new and maybe even empowering ways, and that scholars doing this research will continue to reflect on the methods associated with this work and continue to educate each other.

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## 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”.<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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*)<sup>2</sup>.

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:

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

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

<sup>2</sup> <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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## The ethnomethodology of metapragmatics in everyday interaction: A discussion note following Judith Bridges's "Explaining '-splain' in digital discourse"

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**Abstract.** This discussion note is inspired by, and in turn expands on, a few themes and threads laid out in Judith Bridges's "Explaining '-splain' in digital discourse". The note stresses the focus and contribution linguistic anthropologists have made to understanding various types of indexical meaning-making practices, and the order of indexicality. This discussion note also briefly details the affordances of the word "explain" and the suffix "x-plain", which may account for why this suffix, and not others, has come to be used so frequently.

**Keywords:** Communicative rights; metapragmatics; linguistic anthropology; sociolinguistics; indexicality

Judith Bridges's (2021) paper offers an ambitious and exciting academic read; it is thought-provoking and great to "work with" when addressing everyday interaction in both the online and the offline spheres. This is the case, in part because the sociolinguistic object of the study is so wonderfully rich, in part because the examples Bridges supplies, spanning different contexts of naturally occurring digital discourse, and in part because of the tailored amalgam of theories and concepts she employs, mostly from linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics. In short, explaining "-splain", is a gateway to understating central contemporary sociolinguistic phenomena, not to mention the oscillations between digital (online) and offline communication practices. The paper successfully depicts "-splain" as a distinguishable interactional genre of social media, effective in and effecting a web of dense meanings, indexicalities, and the power-language nexus. Below are a few thoughts I add – my own -suffix, pointing at what makes the neology so sociolinguistically intriguing.

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The first thought concerns the *metapragmatic work* that people engage in routinely, particularly in the digital environment that micro-blogging apps – and social media more generally – offer and afford. Focusing in this way on everyday interactional metapragmatic work, brings to mind a prolific tradition of studies that stresses the reflexivity of (and in) language-as-used. This tradition ranges from Roman Jakobson’s (1957/1990) well-known view of the meta-linguistic function in communicative events, to Michael Silverstein (1976), and his sweeping influence on the field of linguistic anthropology and beyond. I note that Jakobson had influenced Silverstein significantly, not to mention the fact that he mediated to him the work of Charles Peirce (Wilce (2017) writes of Jakobson, that he was Peirce’s “great interpreter”, p. 63), which also shaped Silverstein’s thought and work.

Following Silverstein, Bridges moves from linguistic reflexivity (talking about talking, etc.), to metapragmatic moments that supply an especially fruitful entry point to the culture-power nexus. This is why the way metapragmatic terms are adopted, adapted, and recalibrated in and to different contexts, is so illuminating. It is not just about the reflexivity of language, but also and always about metapragmatic entitlements and pragmatic power/force more generally. Addressing metapragmatics in this way, Bridges also nicely shows how linguistic anthropology’s terminology and conceptualization from the 1970s–80s, can be so fruitfully applied to contemporary digital environments and interactions. This is the case because earlier than other disciplines (notably linguistics), linguistic anthropologists have recognized and called attention to our species’ resourcefulness and creativity, embodied in the ability and inclination for using tools to build other tools, and so on – faculties that are applied to language use. Furthermore, as a result of the influence of critical thought (Marxism, feminism, critical race theory), the way language is harnessed in order to attain social power and control, has been seen as extending from pragmatic to metapragmatic expression. Indeed, metapragmatic expression sometimes holds the key to a critical rendering of language and miscellaneous contexts.

The second point is that the suffix “-splain”, and notably “mansplain”, is an especially delicious example of the everyday action of labeling linguistic activity. I want to point out that it is not only the suffix that accomplishes this, but also the *prefix*, with the critical semiotic and indexical charge it has come to carry during the last few decades (when the underlining patriarchal meaning of such terms as *man-kind*, has been exposed). In a sense, this prefix, as several others illustrated in the paper, serves as an enhancer to the suffix; in Bridges’s terms, the prefix too is indexically charged, making the amalgam “mansplain” dually dense and dually appealing. But the question remains, why “-splain”? Why this suffix and not multiple other metalinguistic terms, which serve commonly to communicate knowledge and epistemic stance (accounts and clarifications are but two examples). What is it in making something “plain”, that morphed so readily to a common socio-pragmatic resource of and for critique of power? Obviously, the word “explain” consists of a prefix and a suffix, lending itself conveniently to adaptations. Also, the word is more popularly used in everyday interaction than similar terms (according to Google Trends). More interesting is the issue of *solicitedness*, whereby an interactional approach to the activity of explaining in everyday interactions suggests it is not usually solicited (unlike, say, most accounts). This quality heightens the potential degree of imposition and impoliteness created by offering unsolicited explanations. A related point concerns the expansion of the use and meaning of the activity of explaining. Antaki and Fielding (1981) have commented on this some time ago, as later did Antaki (1994), noting that what is construed as explaining has

expanded beyond causality, to entail such activities as justifications, arguments, and requests. More recently, building on Antaki's (1994) conversational approach to explaining, Blum-Kulka, Hamo, and Habib (2010) write that explanation slots in conversation "provide opportunities for the construction of well-organized, coherent stretches of *extended discourse*" (p. 443, emphasis added). All this – the word's structure, its popularity, that fact that the "explaining" is offered in an unsolicited manner in interactional use, its wide semiotic spectrum, and its ability to secure a relatively long conversational turn ("extended discourse") – begins to shed light on the ethnomethodological convergence on the choice of the suffix "-splain".

The above-mentioned semiotic expansion of "explain", may also account for the expansion of the suffix "-splain", and perhaps its semiotic inflation. In a culture of catchphrases and hashtags, on the one hand, and the affordances of social media and specifically micro-blogging (which are not unrelated), on the other hand, terms such as "mansplain" run the risk of becoming *buzzwords* or *metapragmatic bottlenecks*. Currently, the meaning of mansplain and other "-splains" is stretched – both by those who employ it and by those who resent and oppose its employment. The fact is that when one searches for examples of "mansplain" on the Google search engine, multiple results point at occurrences where the term is discussed metalinguistically, *not* as used in naturally occurring interactions. Put briefly, searching for examples of "mansplain" brings up examples dealing with the word "mansplain" itself? (though I acknowledge the bias Google's search engine may introduce). As Bridges remarks, this is a high-order indexicality, where this and similar terms serve not so much denotationally, as to index and (dis)align with the parties engaged in the public moral dispute. In this sense, it is not simply a buzzword, but one that, through the indexical order, allows quick positioning.

My third reflection concerns everyday moral discourse in and of the public sphere. Bridges highlights the moral contexts in which the "-splain" labeling is commonly performed. In this vein, it may be stimulating to think of the (digital) public sphere as not only infused with moral values and activities, but also as being *constituted as a public sphere* in and through them. We have witnessed this in various public interactional settings and contexts, both online and offline (Noy, 2017; Tileagă, 2012). It suggests not only the politicization of the public sphere, but the constitution of digital spaces of discourse *as public*.

Fourth and last, moral discourse supplies a view of the relations between online and offline discourses, and more generally between online and offline activity. I agree with Bridges as to the importance of inquiring into these relations, looking at participatory and discursive affordances that different types of public environments possess (Navon & Noy, 2022). This point is addressed systematically and creatively in the paper. In line with the earlier point concerning the public (digital) sphere, I note the "publicness" of the main interactional event that Bridges discusses. I am referring to the racially suffused confrontation between Christian Cooper and Amy Cooper (no relation), which took place on May, 2020, in New York's Central Park. The offline public elements or ingredients are multiple in this scene, for after all, Central Park is arguably the epitome of US public place/space, in part because it is located in NYC. And public spaces index each other, bestowing different political meanings for such notions as "public" and "publicness" in online discourse. Next, there is the stereotypical designation "Karen," which embodies one way through which offline actors migrate to online (public) scenes and spheres; they are not only stereotyped, but are re-labeled (recall that the white woman's name is Amy, yet as Bridges (2021) explains, she was consistently addressed as "Karen", which is a "recently

popularized stereotypical name used to label a disdainful or sanctimonious White woman”, p. 13). The online scene is fascinating, in part because users are ethnomethodological metapragmatists (as I mentioned before), and in part because they are also “conversation analysts” of sorts – they examine and reexamine up close the product of the recording of the troubling Central Park interaction, dissecting and interpreting it, and then re-building it in a multimodal fashion (bringing together images and texts from and to the interaction). As Bridges observes, such mechanisms are at the base of the critical creativity that Twitterers manifest.

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## What language is doing: Initiating a dialogue with Judith Bridges

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**Abstract.** This article is meant to initiate a dialogue with Judith Bridges about the performativity of language. By analyzing how social media users talk about what language is doing, especially when these users accuse someone of whitesplaining, mansplaining, or other forms of [X]-splaining, I show that they implicitly acknowledge what has been called elsewhere the ventriloquial dimension of communication. By ventriloquation, I mean that whenever we speak, write or, more generally, communicate, an act of delegation always takes place, which means that what is said, written or communicated can be presented by others as *making us say things* that we had not necessarily anticipated. This form of delegation, which is typical of the episodes analyzed by Bridges and that I identify as a form of downstream ventriloquation, is contrasted with upstream forms of ventriloquation, that is ventriloquations by which other actors are deemed as expressing themselves through what is being said or, more generally, communicated. I believe that the identification of these two forms of ventriloquation can help us analyze the performativity of language that interests Bridges.

**Keywords:** Linguaging, ventriloquation, resemiotization, entextualization, enregisterment, authority

“Explaining *-splain*” – a wonderful contribution by Judith Bridges (2021) gives me an opportunity to initiate a dialogue with her about the performativity of language. Bridges indeed mentions that she is interested in “how social media users talk about *what language is doing*” (p. 1, my italics), an expression that she repeatedly uses (cf. pp. 2, 3, 6, 20) throughout her article. Although this ascription of a doing to language could be understood metaphorically (for instance, by saying that language does not *really* do anything and that this is just a “way of speaking” that does not completely reflect a real form of agency on language’s part), I would like to take this

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assertion seriously, an assertion she attributes to social media users, knowing anyway that there is always a claim for truth in *any* metaphorical expression.

What does it mean indeed to say that language is doing something? It means that we recognize that what people utter or write (or more generally communicate), that is, the signs they use to express themselves, are themselves doing something, i.e., *making a difference* in a given situation. In other words, communicating is always, whether we like it or not, an act of *delegation* by which the signs we produce – whether these signs are iconic, indexical or symbolic, in the Peircian sense of these terms (Peirce, 1991) – become themselves agents communicating something on our behalf, in our name, or for us (Cooren, 2010, 2020). As speakers, writers or communicators, we might sometimes be surprised by what our expressions make us say, but this phenomenon of delegation constitutes, I believe, the sine qua non condition of *any* act of communication (Caronia and Cooren, 2013).

Although Bridges (2021) never explicitly acknowledges this intractable aspect of communication (maybe because it is so obvious to her), I think that the recognition of this delegative character is important to fully understand the phenomenon of digital vigilantism, what she aptly proposes to call *digilantism*, which indeed characterizes the “call-out culture” of our social media interactions.<sup>1</sup> What do Internet users indeed do when they denounce certain ways of speaking as being inappropriate or wrong? They focus on what someone just said or wrote by denouncing it as expressing a prejudice against or even hostility toward a certain group of people (a form of racism, sexism, classism, etc.). Whether this person meant it that way or not (and this is a key aspect of my point), this is indeed what their *linguaging* is doing, according to those accusers.

As we know, this accusation often goes a little further, as the target is frequently not restricted to the pronounced or written words themselves, but also includes the people who allegedly produced them. These persons can indeed be themselves accused of *coming across* as being prejudiced against or hostile towards a certain group of people. In this case, a distinction appears, however, to be maintained as the offenders are not *necessarily* accused of being themselves prejudiced or hostile. They are accused of *sounding* as such, so to speak. This implicit distinction appears important as it can be seen as a way to minimally protect someone’s positive face (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). The accusation could then look like this: “You might not be racist, sexist or classist yourself, but you definitely sound like one, so please be careful!”

But we also know, and Bridges’ (2021) analyses show this very nicely, that this distinction can also be completely dropped, as accusers can quickly extend the accusation of racism, sexism, classism and any other [X-]ism to the alleged offenders themselves. In this case, the prejudice or hostility that is expressed in the offenders’ words become the offender’s *own* prejudice and hostility. This is, for instance, what is happening with women who are called Karens, “an identity associated with a type of entitled complaining done by middle class (often middle-aged) White women” (p. 5). A Karen is not only a White woman who comes across as entitled; as pointed out by Bridges, she is supposed to “*feel* entitled to getting her way, even at the expense of others” (p. 5, my italics). In this specific case, this person’s *linguaging* is therefore envisaged

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<sup>1</sup> While much of the attention of Bridges’ (2021) article is directed toward left-wing vigilantism against expressions of racism, sexism and other excluding attitudes, other forms of digilantism exist on the other side of the political spectrum, especially when it comes to nationalism.

as expressing a *sense* of entitlement that she is accused of *having* because of the status she *feels* she has as a White person. From *coming across* as being racist, sexist, classist, etc. to being accused of *being* racist, sexist, classist, etc., the line can indeed be very thin even if it can remain an important one.

These processes of resemiotization (Iedema, 2003) or entextualization (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) that Bridges (2021) analyzes in her article can thus be compared with what I have called elsewhere a sort of ventriloquation (Bartesaghi, 2014; Cooren, 2010; Nathues et al., 2021). By ventriloquation, I mean the process by which someone or something makes someone or something else say or do something, a phenomenon that is constitutive, in my opinion, of *any* act of communication. Given the delegative character of communication, anything that we say, write or, more generally, communicate can indeed be envisaged as *making us say things*, that is, *ventriloquizing* us. Sometimes, these signs make us say things that we intended to say (for instance, someone is asking her interlocutor to pass her the salt and this person does pass her the salt), but sometimes they can also, as we know, *betray* us (for instance, someone thought that she was just commenting on the disorderliness of an apartment, but what we said is heard as a reproach).

This type of ventriloquation is what has been called elsewhere (Cooren, 2010, 2014a, 2014b, 2020) a form of *downstream* ventriloquation to the extent that it is the signs we produce – and can be considered down the stream of communication – that are deemed as making us say something. However, there is another form of ventriloquation, that I call *upstream* ventriloquation,<sup>2</sup> which corresponds to the various things or persons that are *made to say things* through what we are saying. This is, for instance, what happens when someone claims that facts speak for themselves, invokes specific protocols, or more obviously, acts as a spokesperson for an organization. In all these cases, there is a form of upstream ventriloquation to the extent that facts, protocols or an organization are respectively presented as *speaking through* the person who is ventriloquizing them, that is, making them say things.

However, upstream ventriloquation is also at stake in less obvious circumstances. For instance, any time we say something about a situation, whether it is the weather (“It’s so sunny today!”), a colleague of ours (“Pedro looks really tired”) or a war taking place in a given part of the world (“The situation in Ukraine is catastrophic”), ventriloquation can be identified to the extent that these situations can be said to *express themselves* through what is being said. In other words, analyzing what people say from a ventriloquial viewpoint consists of acknowledging not only what these people are doing in saying something (e.g., declaring something about the weather, their colleague Pedro or the war in Ukraine), but also what is expressing itself *through* what is being said (e.g., the sunniness of the weather, Pedro’s apparent fatigue, and the catastrophic character of the situation in Ukraine are all expressing themselves in what is being said).

The ventriloquial thesis thus proposes to achieve a reversal of perspective that has, to my knowledge, never been operated in linguistic and conversation analyses before. While these

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<sup>2</sup> As we know, upstream means “in the opposite direction from that in which a stream or river flows; nearer to the source” while downstream means “in the direction in which a stream or river flows” (Oxford Dictionary). If we compare an act of communication to a stream, downstream ventriloquation thus refers to the act that consists of ventriloquizing someone or something through the stream of signs that she, he or it is producing. In contrast, upstream ventriloquation refers to the act that consists of acknowledging what happens in the opposite direction, that is, identifying who or what is made to say things through what is being said or written.

perspectives always tend to limit their analyses to what human participants and only human participants are saying and doing in various situations (à la speech act theory, if you will), a ventriloquial approach shows that various elements of these situations are, in fact, *also* expressing themselves when interactions are taking place. For instance, whenever someone is saying, “It’s so sunny today!” it is, to a large extent, the sunniness of the weather that is expressing itself through this declaration. In other words, this person is not only an *actor* (she is definitely declaring something about the weather), but she is also what could be called a *passer*, that is, a *medium* through whom other things – here, the weather – express themselves. The sunniness of the weather can thus be said to express itself not only through the heat it communicates to us, but also, and this is a crucial point, through what is said about it.

These phenomena of ventriloquation (whether upstream or downstream) are, I believe, constantly made visible in the interactions that Bridges analyzes because these interactions correspond to what could be typically called a form of metacommunication. By metacommunication, I mean situations where communication is problematized by the participants themselves. As long as things go smoothly, the phenomena of ventriloquation (which are, as already mentioned, constitutive of *any* act of communication) can indeed remain relatively invisible to the analysts and the participants. However, it is when something does not work as planned that the agency of intermediaries – here, the texts written by the social media users – is revealed, as pointed out by Callon (1986) and Latour (1996) a long time ago.

As an illustration, let’s look at the following interaction where the (in)famous altercation between Christian Cooper (a birdwatcher) and Melody Cooper (a dog owner) in New York City’s Central Park is commented on by three social media users:

- 1 @Charlie: Calling the NYPD to a seemingly unarmed and distant person in one of the
- 2 busiest parks in the country is extremely unlikely to get anyone hurt [...] It’s
- 3 not “calling a hit”
- 4 Reply 1: You’re being deliberately obtuse. I am not even in America, yet I know the
- 5 amount of danger she was going to put that guy in. Don’t come here trying to
- 6 [...] whitesplain this. This is a touchy subject. Read an article or two about this
- 7 Reply 2: Please do not whitesplain or mansplain

(Bridges, 2021, p. 15)

From a ventriloquial perspective, we can see several things happening here. First, it is noteworthy that @Charlie is implicitly *invoking* a sort of general principle in his intervention (“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” (lines 1–2)). This is a principle to the extent that it is indeed supposed to apply to many different situations, including, according to this contributor, the interaction between Melody and Christian Cooper.

@Charlie can thus be said to be implicitly *ventriloquizing* this principle to the extent that he is *making it say* that what Melody Cooper (the alleged Karen) was doing during this altercation was relatively harmless. Interestingly, this upstream ventriloquation of a general principle is what allows him to then reject a possible way Melody Cooper could be herself ventriloquized by others. By saying “It’s not ‘calling a hit’” (lines 2–3), he is indeed calling into question any attempt that would consist of *making her look like* someone who would be putting someone else’s life in danger (a form of downstream ventriloquation).

If we now look at the first reply that @Charlie’s intervention prompted, we can observe how various forms of ventriloquation are also at stake. “You’re being deliberately obtuse” (line 4) is interesting as it appears to both (1) make him *come across as* and (2) present him as *being* obtuse. By specifying that he is *deliberately* obtuse, the author of reply 1 is indeed accusing @Charlie of willingly saying something stupid or insensitive. In this case, “being obtuse” is not supposed to be heard as an accusation that would essentialize him as being always this way. In this reply, @Charlie thus *becomes* someone who is acting in bad faith by purposely acting like someone who *sounds* obtuse (downstream ventriloquation). In other words, this is how he is being ventriloquized at this point, a ventriloquation that maintains the distinction between coming across as X (here, obtuse) and actually being X.

In what follows, we see that the author of reply 1 then positions herself as someone who is “not even in America” (line 4), but who yet “know[s] the amount of danger [Melody Cooper] was going to put [Christian Cooper] in” (lines 4–5). *Speaking as* is a form of upstream ventriloquation, as it consists of saying that it is not only *she* who is now expressing herself but *also* a person who does not live in the United States, a person that she happens to be. This ventriloquation thus allows this commenter to lend weight to her position, as she implies that everybody, including people who live outside the US, *know* that what Melody Cooper did could have put Christian Cooper in serious danger<sup>3</sup>. The accusation of “being deliberately obtuse” (line 4) is therefore justified by what is indirectly presented as a sort of commonplace: @Charlie, you know, as everyone does, that this danger was real.

Following this justification, we then see how the accusation of whitesplaining comes about: “Don’t come here trying to [...] whitesplain this. This is a touchy subject. Read an article or two about this” (lines 5–6). Again, this accusation can be seen as a form of downstream ventriloquation to the extent it consists of portraying what @Charlie just said or is about to say later as an “explanation from White speakers to racially marked hearers on race-related topics” (Bridges, 2021, p. 4). In other words, downstream ventriloquation is also at stake when we observe what someone’s words become in another person’s mouth, which is precisely what is happening here. In this case, this ventriloquation goes even further as the accusation of whitesplaining consists of positioning @Charlie as *speaking as* a White condescending individual (upstream ventriloquation). If we add to this portrait the one that is indirectly made by the author of Reply 2, we then even have a White condescending *man*, given the additional accusation of mansplaining.

In general, the accusation of [X]-splaining helps us understand that ventriloquation can sometimes consist of making someone *not only* (1) say something (in this case, talking about a topic that concerns non-X), but *also* (2) represent how (some?) Xs, a category that the person is presented as belonging to, speak more generally, whether these Xs are men (mansplain), White (whitesplain), thin (thinsplain), rich (richsplain), etc. As we know, the art of ventriloquism not only consists of throwing one’s voice in such a way that it sounds as if it were coming from a dummy’s mouth, it also consists of making the puppet come across as having some specific attitudes, attributes or personality, which are supposed to be distinctive features of this character

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, we could also note that this ventriloquation also risks *undermining* this commenter’s position. A reply from a potential antagonist along the lines of: “You don’t even live in the US, so you clearly don’t know what you’re talking about” almost suggests itself. This shows that ventriloquation is always a risky business, as is any form of invocation.

(oftentimes, in ventriloquists' shows, the dummies are indeed portrayed as sly, tricky or mischievous, which is meant to present the ventriloquist as being ridiculed and outsmarted by her puppet).

The authors of replies 1 and 2 are therefore putting words in @Charlie's mouth (whitesplaining and mansplaining is what you are doing right now, which I identify as a form of downstream ventriloquation), but in doing so, they also *highlight* specific traits that @Charlie and his interlocutors are supposed to embody/express and could have otherwise remained invisible (upstream ventriloquation). Whitesplaining and mansplaining indeed function like a sort of package deal: if you are accused of whitesplaining or mansplaining (downstream ventriloquation), it means, by definition, that you sound respectively as a condescending White person or a condescending man (upstream ventriloquation). Not only that, it also means that the persons you are talking to (who happen to be the persons who are now accusing you) are themselves respectively other-than-White or other-than-men. This form of ventriloquation thus amounts to staging an *interactional scene* where a specific category of people (men, white people, rich people, thin people, etc.) are talking condescendingly to people who don't belong to this category (other-than-men, other-than-White, other-than-rich, other-than-thin, etc.).

The accusation of [X]-splain can thus indeed be seen as a form of *enregisterment* (Agha, 2007; Bridges, 2021) to the extent that the object of this denunciation, i.e., what has just been said, is retrospectively presented as belonging to a specific register or repertoire that expresses itself and categorizes a certain type of speakers or category of people (X) when they happen to speak to people who don't belong to this category (non-X), especially about topics that directly concern non-Xs. As it is often the case in disputes or disagreements, we therefore see how the alleged [X]-splainers retrospectively discover what they were allegedly doing without necessarily knowing it, a discovery that they can, of course, reject and contest.

Although this form of downstream ventriloquation can rightly be seen as a form of delegitimization, it is, as Bridges (2021) rightly points out, a way for non-Xs, who have been historically delegitimized, to disarm the [X]-splainers. While these Xs implicitly feel legitimized to explain things that directly concern non-Xs, non-Xs explicitly question this legitimacy, which allows them to attempt to reappropriate an epistemic authority (Heritage and Raymond, 2005) that had been historically denied from them. A certain violence is at stake, for sure, but this violence appears at least proportionate to the one that has silently delegitimized non-Xs for a very long time.

While ventriloquist shows are often characterized by their eventfulness (as the dummy is meant to say things that are supposed to surprise the ventriloquist and her audience), we see that this ventriloquation is supposed to highlight the relatively mundane and common character of what is being said. A sort of *double ventriloquation* is indeed at stake here: non-Xs ventriloquize Xs, but in doing so, they also portray Xs as the mouthpieces of registers and repertoires that allegedly and repeatedly express themselves through them. If interlocutors are actors, they are also, as we already saw, *passers*, that is, ideologies (through the form of habits, registers or repertoires) speak *through* them and it is this ideology that non-Xs try to rightfully denounce.

If we can say that the sunniness of the weather is expressing itself whenever someone says "It's so sunny today!", we could also point out that the persons who denounce these forms of [X]-splaining *eo ipso* show that condescending/patronizing registers typically express themselves in these situations. Through these accusations, Xs are therefore reduced to puppets

that keep expressing a form of domination, a domination that, according to these accusers, should be rightfully called into question. If language is indeed doing something, it might be because a lot of things constantly ventriloquize themselves in what we speak. This is what non-Xs metapragmatically identify in their accusations. And this is what Bridges (2021) helps us better understand in her beautiful article.

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## 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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## 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),<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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”<sup>2</sup> 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:

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<sup>2</sup> 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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## The instability of meaning in metapragmatic neologisms

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**Abstract.** In this response I address the discussion notes written in reply to my focus article, “Explaining *-splain* in digital discourse.” In the remarks from Andrea R. Leone-Pizzighella, Bárbara Marqueta Gracia, Chaim Noy, François Cooren, Barbara Fultner, and Ursula Lutzky and Robert Lawson, some common themes emerged regarding the instability of meanings, how we treat neologisms, and some research methods for understanding the equivocal nature of metapragmatic neologisms. My reply addresses these issues. With the intent to accomplish the sort of productive, interdisciplinary conversation that *Language Under Discussion* promotes, I hope my reflection and final contribution helps us better understand language and communication.

**Keywords:** Neologisms, *-splain*, polysemy, normativity, metapragmatics, morphopragmatics, citizen sociolinguistics, prescriptivism 2.0, ventriloquation, catchphrase culture

First, I would like to thank all of the authors who took the energy to read and contemplate my focus article (Bridges, 2021), and to offer inspirational, encouraging, and important comments in their discussion notes. I must also express my gratitude to the *Language Under Discussion* editors for their patience and guidance, and for this opportunity to engage in dialogue about language with scholars from diverse theoretical perspectives.

In what follows, I reply to the discussion notes from Andrea R. Leone-Pizzighella, Bárbara Marqueta Gracia, Chaim Noy, François Cooren, Barbara Fultner, and from Ursula Lutzky and Robert Lawson. As a salute to the ontological plurality of voices and cacophonous nature of discourse that is under examination in this volume, I attempt to address certain points brought up across the discussion notes, and hopefully do so in a way that conveys their connection to one another and to the implications that our dialogue might have on understanding human exchanges. I draw from the six discussion notes to examine the volatile nature of meaning, the issue with neologisms in the inconsistency of meanings, and the methodological approaches

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that might offer not only explanations of these variable neologisms but also estimations regarding the substantial yet covert impact they have on the constitution of society.

### **Catchphrase Culture: Out with semantic normativity, in with polysemic intensification?**

The first topic to address is that of neology in the age of “catchphrase culture” to use Noy’s (2021) term. The word *mansplain* is not just a neologism born from the lexical and phonetic blending of *man* and *explain*, but it also serves as the source for an endless list of neologisms that get constructed by way of {-splain}, a bound morpheme (i.e., a morpheme that must be affixed because it cannot stand alone.) In part because it is fun, and also because it is an important element of understanding the bigger picture, I first cover some qualities of neology and lexical semantics. Then, as the highly abstract and semantically instable aspect of *-splain* words is referenced in some manner across each of the commentators’ responses to my paper, I address a larger question that arose concerning how the variability of *-splain* words link to broader issues across the six discussion notes.

I would like to thank Bárbara Marqueta Gracia for introducing me to morphopragmatics in her response, “Metapragmatic neology in digital discourse: Solid groundwork for morphopragmatics and construction morphology.” My excitement over learning about this approach to language study is accompanied by my incredulity that in my years of enthusiasm about morphology and pragmatics, I somehow remained oblivious to the notion of morphopragmatics. As she explains, morphopragmatics explores how morphological functions intertwine with pragmatic functions, and the variation of morphemic meaning and function across affixational patterns. An understanding of how new words get constructed is especially worthwhile in the digital era. As she puts it, “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” (p. 39).

In his discussion note on the ethnomethodology of metapragmatics, Chaim Noy also pays attention to the potential for neology afforded by communicative technology. Accounting for the “semiotic inflation” of *-splain* words, Noy describes a “culture of catchphrases and hashtags” (p. 44). Both Marqueta Gracia and Noy bring up this point, that trendy new words pop up constantly and even more easily nowadays with social media, micro-blogging, and open dictionaries. One of many reasons for this is because humans love to find creative ways to express themselves. While anyone can create new words, we are interested in the ones that catch on and why they do so. Neologisms are like baby turtles hatching from their eggs on a beach. A small fraction of them actually make it into the ocean and grow up to be adult turtles; for the majority, their existence is a momentary one, in which they serve to feed a recurrent hunger of those that consume them, and then they are gone and forgotten. Words, like languages, (and like humans and turtles), are alive, developing and evolving over time, usually living a mostly unremarkable little life.<sup>1</sup> Not all of us get to stick around for a full lifespan of intertextual

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<sup>1</sup> I should clarify my tone and intention here, which is to playfully illustrate my view that languages and humans are inextricably connected and mutually emblematic. In saying that languages, and pieces of language like lexemes and morphemes, are like living organisms, I intend only to offer a simile that conjures the parallels in how

influence and do what *man* and *explain* are doing, and so far, what these young *-splain* terms seem to be doing. Take a look at almost every entry of creative wordplay on Urban Dictionary and consider how few of the newly coined words actually become circulated into the languaging of even tiny, specific discourse communities. Even then, its shelf life is likely set to expire as soon as another catchy new word siphons the interest of language users for its own proverbial fifteen minutes of fame.

In the world of words, neologisms are tender-aged, making them more vulnerable and easily manipulated by others. “A neologism cannot be right or wrong,” as Barbara Fultner states in her discussion note “Languaging in the age of Meta” (p. 56). Fultner also asks a question that I had not previously considered: “Can a neologism be too successful?” (p. 58). She addresses here an important aspect of *-splain* words in that they can “attract attention to the speaker or blogger” for their “amusing and eye-catching cleverness.” This question comes up in some form throughout this issue’s multivocal discussion of language: that *-splain* words are evidence that there is something happening in the accountability of language use and semantic normativity (Fultner, 2021), in the relationship between discourse and action (Cooren, 2021), in the relationship between prescriptivism and the moral order (Lutzky & Lawson, 2021), in how language is harnessed for social power and control (Noy, 2021), in how polysemous meanings are represented as knowledge in the minds of individual speakers (Marqueta Gracia, 2021), and how on the internet, anyone at all can add to the mix their own individual interpretation of who is “X enough” to authorize what language means (Leone-Pizzighella, 2021). If it is the collective actions of individuals that invoke social and linguistic change, then, whether we like it or not, even “contradictory, offensive, conspiratorial, and unreliable” (p. 35) contributions, as well as Humpty-Dumptistic claims of words meaning whatever the speaker wishes them to mean (Fultner, 2021, p. 57), all get to add some flavor to that recipe for social evolution. To describe it using Cooren’s (2021) lens of ventriloquation, innumerable and diverse ontologies are linguistically mediated into existence in the form of utterances, gestures, and texts that we produce. The crucial point is that all acts of languaging exert some level of force in shaping discourse.

Of course, depending on your perspective on (or current mood about) fellow humans, this process could seem equally beautiful and terrifying. What Fultner points out is that the nature of discourse in microblogging environments unfortunately stifles extended dialogue where meaning and stances could be teased out. Obviously online communication can be a complicated task; complicated, for example, by the challenge of successfully embedding the illocutionary force of an utterance into a text box to then be interpreted by an audience we can only imagine, an audience that is likely exposed to your text in the same minute they encounter a dozen others. But on top of that, what is the likelihood that interlocutors, when confronted with a misunderstanding, will do the work to sort it out? Why would they when it is far less laborious to resort to ignoring, blaming, retaliating, or some other unproductive or counterproductive action that they almost certainly will not be held accountable for?

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languages and humans develop. As they experience isolation from or contact with one another, as their diverse reputations and roles change over time, humans and languages share similarities. My comparison does not intend to overlook or oversimplify critical differences between the natural forces of biological life/death and the egocentric forces behind language genocide and displacement. I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out potential glitches in what explanation might get conveyed by my analogy.

Bakhtin's (1981) notions of centrifugal and centripetal forces on language come to mind here. There are always influences on language that either aim to maintain conventions (centripetal) or push boundaries through creativity (centrifugal). Fultner brings up reclaimed slurs, such as "gay" and "queer," widely used and affectively neutral terms that were once highly offensive slurs used against members of the LGBTQ community. Conversely, some terms that were originally proudly self-avowed labels, e.g., "social justice warrior" and "SJW," became tools of mockery by the out-group. Similarly, Fultner gives the example of "political correctness," which described a type of language encouraged by the left. Like "SJW," conservative groups have appropriated "political correctness" to instead connote something negative. However, returning to ways that words get used to carry out actions, it is worth mentioning that while it is inevitable that the semantic value of words might shift over time and across space, what we are seeing in some instances, such as with *-splains* and other socially or politically charged terms (e.g., "Critical Race Theory" in the United States, as Fultner discusses), is that the semantic shift happens deliberately because enough people wanted it to happen. So, terms can take on contradictory or reverse meanings, resulting in divergent polysemes that can make it very difficult to critique someone's position. In the form of misappropriations, they are imbued with new connotations that "seem to be entirely defanged" and "reduced to amusing cleverness" (Fultner, p. 58) or, more severely, that reject the existence of the social issues indexed by the term. Rebranding a term like "Critical Race Theory" (CRT) with "a non-standard and ill-defined meaning," means that to critique the viewpoint of the theory now "requires debate over meanings as well as the actual educational policy" (p. 58). These points demonstrate that sometimes when terms are recontextualized, it feels like someone is cheating at the game of language, mobilizing counterfeit signs or engaging in deceptive usage of signs for self-serving reasons, instead of using signs the way they are intended to work.

In examining the structure of *-splain* words, Marqueta Gracia asks, "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 speakers?" (p. 39). Marqueta Gracia shows how Constructional Morphology gives insight in how new *-splain* words can easily be created and interpreted. Yet at the same time, the complexity of the formula hints at some potential reasons why *-splain* words are so easily recontextualized—as did my own inconsistency in the focus piece in referring to *-splain* as a bound morpheme, a suffix, and a verbal root. I am grateful to Marqueta Gracia for pointing out my error in using these terms interchangeably to refer to *-splain*, when in fact it is not a suffix nor a root according to morphological theory, but rather a member of a *constructional idiom* (p. 41).

In Andrea Leone-Pizzighella's note, "The evolution of *-splain* terms and the spirit of Citizen Sociolinguistics: A note on methods," she devotes some time to the ways that citizen sociolinguists discuss *-splain* words and who participants in interactions are and their epistemic authority. Her point brings up, for one, the notion of intersectionality, since men, for example, are not just that; obviously men are simultaneously men and people of various ethnicities, sexual orientations, ages, etc. Noy also writes that the element {*man-*} also has a "critical semiotic and indexical charge [that] it has come to carry during the last few decades (when the underlining patriarchal meaning of such terms as *man-kind*, has been exposed)" (p. 44). It is understandable that one reason *mansplain* is disliked comes from the interpretation that it refers to men as a monolithic group, and therefore the sense that it automatically accuses all men of mansplaining.



On the instability and ambiguity of *-splain* and possible reasons behind it, Lutzky and Lawson (2021) also make a crucial point: while all *-splain* formations share similarities, a difference that must be taken into consideration is how the terms affixed to *-splain* (e.g., *man-*, *rich-*) vary in relation to perspectives of morality. The meaning of each variant is infused with its position on a “moral gradient” (p. 58). There is a perceived level of moral severity associated with various *-splain* accusations, as well as a moral currency potentially gained by calling out others for a form of *-splaining*. Being accused of one type (for example, *thinsplain*) might be perceived to have “a higher level of acceptance or legitimacy” (p. 58), while another form (e.g., *whitesplain*) is likelier perceived as a more severe breach of moral norms and principles.

But returning to Leone-Pizzighella’s essay, even if the focus is isolated to one social group based on categorizations of sex, skin color, weight, tax bracket, etc., the question of epistemic authority can still come up. Discourses around *-splains* shed light on this theme of a speaker being “not [X] enough.” These distinctions of identity are what Blommaert and Varis (2011) refer to as discursive orientations of “enoughness,” where “one has to ‘have’ enough of the emblematic features in order to be ratified as an authentic member of an identity category” (p. 4). These enoughness discourses shake up the *-splainer/-splainee* divisions, thus illuminating how boundless, really, is the range of possible utterances that could potentially be considered instances of *-splaining*. As Leone-Pizzighella points out, the context of each call-out via *X-splain* brings up a viewpoint: that someone is X enough to be an X-splainer, and/or that they themselves are non-X enough to make the accusation. (Whether that viewpoint is shared by anyone else besides the speaker of a specific call-out is not necessarily the point, since “the *ethos* of Citizen Sociolinguistics says we need to consider it” nonetheless if we want to get the whole picture, p. 35).

An example that comes to mind (from Bridges, 2019, p. 204) is in an interaction about fatphobia<sup>2</sup> in which *thinsplain* was used: one person said, “I think smallfats who can’t address their privilege are a problem for myself and for ssbbw [super sized big beautiful woman].” Here, it is not a thin person, but a “smallfat” who was accused of *thinsplaining* to a “ssbbw.” In this instance (like several others in my dataset), the authority to speak on experiences of fatness narrows further to exclude non-thin speakers who are viewed as “not fat enough” to speak on issues such as fatphobia. This links to Fultner’s discussion of Humpty-Dumptism (p. 64) and speakers believing they need not be accountable to semantic norms. It supports the idea that while there are times where the word getting misused is just a case of ignorance or misunderstanding, for the most part, people know what they are doing with language.

Most of the time, when we interact with one another, we are able to achieve successful communication of our thoughts. However, surely everyone has experienced moments in which our utterances do not do the things for us, or to us, that we intended. This process of communication can betray us. After we express the signs and put them out there, what they will do next is not entirely in our control. This is because, according to Cooren, the construction of interaction cannot be understood solely as a localized, individual accomplishment of humans in conversation, since context is a “dislocated exogenous materialization” of multiple “ontologies incarnate in our discussions” (Bartesaghi, 2012, p. 472).

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<sup>2</sup> *Fatphobia* refers to a disgust and disrespect towards fat people for their body size and/or shape.

I often wonder how any communicative act is ever successful, though, when you really think about all that is involved for us to shape language that is appropriate for the particular context and then hope that it is inferred by our addressee in a way that is close enough to how we intended it. I have found Cooren's theory of ventriloquation immensely helpful in my attempts to explain how this happens—not to mention, also for explaining how powerful language is in shaping our realities and what parts of the world around us get to come into existence to co-author our reality. Ventriloquation identifies the links between language users and the structures and constraints that their language creates in consequence.

### On figuring it out

I would like to give attention to the specific methodological and theoretical approaches of the six discussion notes, all of which are remarkably useful for understanding the constantly shifting semantics and fluidity of language in digital communication.

For Noy, it is ethnomethodological metapragmaticians who do the work of dissecting and interpreting contemporary sociolinguistic phenomena across online and offline communication in order to prompt “a web of dense meanings, indexicalities, and the power-language nexus” (p. 43). I appreciate Noy's point that contemporary digital communicative practices are indeed creating the need for us to unthink and rethink approaches to understanding language and the ways that discursive practices reflect society. But not always. Despite the ever-evolving tools that we use to mediate our communication, what remains constant, and what is conceptualized by the tradition of Jakobsonian linguistic reflexivity is people's routine and ubiquitous metapragmatic work. At the core of Jakobson and Halle's (1956) understanding of language was the idea that for language to function at all, it required reflexivity. That is, language must be able to refer to itself, otherwise the notion of language as we understand it would be obsolete. As Verschueren (1995) wrote, the phenomenon of linguistic reflexivity is “so central to the process of language use that it may even be regarded as one of the original evolutionary prerequisites for the development of human language to be possible at all” (p. 369). This reminds me of the Cartesian notion, “I think therefore I am,” and maybe we can also say “language metalanguages therefore language languages.” Noy says it best, though: “the way metapragmatic terms are adopted, adapted, and recalibrated in and to different contexts” reveals that “it is not just about the reflexivity of language, but also and always about metapragmatic entitlements and pragmatic power/force more generally” (p. 44).

Citizen Sociolinguistics brings different ways of knowing into public discourse and emphasizes the *agentive involvement* of citizen sociolinguists, which is not quite the same thing as crowd-sourcing information based on questions posed by a linguist agent, which is done in Folk Linguistics. I agree with Leone-Pizzighella's complaint that in recent years, Citizen Sociolinguistics has been confused with Citizen Science and Folk Linguistics. In fact, the methodology has been split into two camps because the meaning of Citizen Sociolinguistics has drifted off from the meaning that was originally intended by Betsy Rymes and Andrea Leone-Pizzighella, who first proposed the idea. As people used Citizen Sociolinguistics to describe what is actually closer to citizen science or folk linguistics, they effectively added new definitions of it. This adds an example to what I have been discussing in this paper on the instability of meaning.

I am pleased that Leone-Pizzighella put my study in the Rymesian camp of Citizen Sociolinguistics. I appreciate and would like to highlight her note that Citizen Sociolinguistics allows

for the discovery of more perceptions and principles that exist amongst the cacophony of sociolinguistic interpretations. For me, it seems like in mainstream discourses, the type of scientific inquiry that is generally regarded as trustworthy and valuable, skews heavily towards quantitative studies based on big data. Like anything else, it is tempting to just rely on the clear-cut straightforward explanations, which are more easily achieved with numbers-based studies; a major flaw of humans is taking the path of least resistance and too easily accepting the myth of black-or-white explanations. While generalization and categorization is useful (not to mention, evolutionarily-speaking, it accounts for how we have learned to survive life and just get through each day), obviously, it is dangerous to limit our explanation of the world around us in such a way. I will not continue to preach to the metaphorical choir on the (undervalued) importance of qualitative research, but I wanted to highlight Leone-Pizzighella's note on the dissonant and noisy nature of discourse that Citizen Sociolinguistics tackles, especially the highly heteroglossic discourse of online language. I would like to see more applications of Rymesian Citizen Sociolinguistics for doing investigations of chaotic and messy communication, because, the way I see it, it would be scientifically irresponsible to *not* describe the multifactorial and vacillating nature of sociolinguistics.

Having said that, understanding *-splain* words need not always be a knotty endeavor. A mathematically clear-cut formula that condenses the meanings of *-splains* is offered by Marqueta Gracia through Construction Morphology. The formula considers the patterns in how pragmatic meaning gets constructed via morphological processes by plugging morphemes and metapragmatic effects into the schema's formula. It involves a hierarchy in the lexicon based on levels of abstraction and concreteness—where all morphological schemas “are interconnected via their shared phonetic, morphocategorical, semantic, and morphopragmatic features” (p. 41). Therefore, when the [Noun]+*splain* pattern that we see (e.g., in *mansplain*, *whitesplain*, and *thinsplain*) gets disrupted by new constructions like *covidsplain*, the analogical approach falls short: if *man+splain* refers to *splaining* like men to non-men, then *covid+splain* must mean *splaining* like covid to non-covid. Instead, Marqueta Garcia views *-splain* words as *constructional idioms*, i.e., schemas where part of a word gets fixed (e.g., *-splain*, *-gate*, other affixoids), and stored in the speaker's lexicon as an independent morpheme. As it is combined with other morphemes, which also receive a specific interpretation in the new context, the resulting constructional idiom takes on a new and specific meaning. Marqueta Gracia's approach is valuable in that it offers potential future help on understanding cognitive semantics, how we map words (pieces of words, strings of words, suprasegmental features of words, etc.), their polysemous meanings, their associations with other words and pieces of language, etc. in our brains.

Fultner approaches the relationship between convention and creativity in dialogue by questioning the role of semantic normativity in meaningful public discourse. She writes, “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” (p. 64). Fultner, probably unknowingly so, points out the boundaries of my comfort zone, recognizing that my analysis takes a strictly descriptive approach without venturing much past the description. It is true that my intention in the focus piece was not to do more than show and describe how people approach, respond to, and deploy these lexical resources to do a variety of things. I admit that much is left up to the reader in regard to interpreting how the patterns in language and languaging that I

described might then connect with other social trends, patterns that could be evidential in understanding the sociopolitical unrests that are astir and the background context from which they developed. But of course it is also true that many of those things people do with the commentary on or usage of *-splain* words have social implications that *should* be talked about, a task that Fultner takes on (among others like Nicole Dular). So I appreciate Fultner attending to more than just what people are doing and how they do it with *-splain* language, bringing up necessary questions on the consequences of “the slipperiness of language in the age of Twitter, microblogging, and cancel culture” and “why it seems increasingly difficult to have meaningful public discourse” (p. 54). It is crucial to identify linguistic practices *and* discuss if and when they are symptomatic of a social malady, what might be the causes of the infection and what possible treatments should be applied.

In the discussion note by Lutzky and Lawson (2021), *-splain* is situated in the context of prescriptivism, representing a new strategy in which rules of language use are proclaimed. As opposed to the prescriptivism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, characterized by institutionally enforced usage guides and dictionaries, “*-splain* variants can be seen as a broader strategy of *discursive* prescriptivism... a type of bottom-up prescriptivism” (p. 56). The authors suggest that when looking at evaluations of language correctness in the contemporary context, we need an updated strategy. First, there is the increasing number and variety of online resources offering advice on language use and lists of acceptable definitions, spellings, and pronunciations. These online resources essentially reflect the diversity of discourse in the digital world. But more significant than the diversity of language guides is the change in the type of prescriptive behavior. Discursive prescriptivism, or “prescriptivism 2.0,” illustrates this behavior in which, rather than referring to a grammar handbook to correct language forms, people draw from sociolinguistic and pragmatic ideologies to police discourse in a specific context.

Functioning as a form of “communicative gatekeeping” by highlighting the appropriateness of interlocutors’ communicative behavior (p. 58), Lutzky and Lawson’s notion of prescriptivism 2.0 is similar to that of “Citizen Pragmatics” that I mentioned in the focus paper (p. 10, see also Bridges, 2019). When citizen sociolinguists engage in discussions around *-splain* terms, they are not only making sociolinguistic observations such as how specific features index regional or social variations in language, but they also take a moral stance, focusing on the appropriateness of an utterance given the interlocutors’ social identities and the relative power relations ascribed to those social positions.

In tandem with prescriptivism 2.0, Lutzky and Lawson (2021) also offer the notion of “moral gradience,” specifically the level of moral severity that is associated with various *-splain* accusations. In the section above, I addressed some aspects already; however, there was one particularly resonant point made by the authors that is valuable when discussing frameworks for studying metapragmatic neology. In their essay, they questioned the extent to which *thinsplaining* is part of a wider strategy of left-wing political discourse, and they recommend more corroboratory analyses for interpreting the moral strategies that align with *-splain* variants. Indeed, more research on the metapragmatic commentary of various *-splains* could help us better understand a hierarchical order that any given society might have for its various

moral dilemmas and the reasons behind them.<sup>3</sup> It is perfectly imaginable that issues of body size, for example, might be viewed as a trivial matter amongst members of one society, as a taboo topic in another culture, and then perceived as a top issue in another place.

Lastly, Cooren's notion of ventriloquation provides an effective analytical lens in understanding culture in action. It allows a comprehensive perspective on interactions through micro-level analyses of actions that are implicated by what is said, analyses of actions or thoughts that are called into existence through language. From Cooren's perspective, communication is always an act of delegation. When we produce meaningful language (word/signifier connecting with a concept/signified), our signs take on agentive power; they become agents that do things for us, namely, perform actions on our behalf. Without language, doing things like making a promise or expressing an apology become very difficult, if not impossible. Cooren brings up the fact that accusations of digilantism can represent different ways that language delegates or different ways that language as an agent does things for us. For example, speakers, based on their language, can be accused of *coming across* a certain way, or *being* a certain way.

Cooren also describes ventriloquation that can be upstream or downstream. I have to say, upon reading his note for the first time, I understood nothing. The notion made no sense to me. But eventually, something clicked, and now I cannot "unhear" it. I agree with him that all communication takes on some form of upstream or downstream ventriloquation, where in producing signs to express ourselves, we are also delegating the sign to do something on our behalf (and therefore ventriloquizing downstreamly). We also draw on things in the upstream direction, referencing existing things like principles, cliches, or someone else's speech to do things like justify, reject, or authorize credibility of our own or other's language.

## Conclusion

My focus essay (Bridges, 2021) aimed to emphasize how *mansplain* and its variants all illustrate linguistic reflexivity, creativity, and gatekeeping. For me, *-splain* words epitomize the bidirectional influence between language and its speakers. My conceptualization of this bit of language has now been multiplied by the ideas shared across six discussion responses from seven scholars of various fields of study and with unique experiences and perspectives. In my final reply here, I have aimed for a reply paper that both spotlights the invaluable contributions from the other authors and echoes the expansion of my own perception on language and discourse. Adding to my initial points on the ways that the meanings of terms can shift across time and space, we have also examined in this journal issue: some reasons behind these semantic shifts alongside the polysemic intensification of catchphrases and hashtags in contemporary digital discourse; some potential consequences of the semantic instability observable in trendy terms, especially those relating to political issues; and the lack of accountability for deliberate misappropriation of terms and its effects.

The discussion of *-splain* and metapragmatic neology has brought up all the beautiful, silly, annoying, problematic, and confusing ways in which language can be used. The reason for studying it is defended by Citizen Sociolinguistics, i.e., by considering the metapragmatic judgments of online citizen ethnographers, as I attempted to demonstrate, and as did Leonne-

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<sup>3</sup> As for the moral gradience of racism, sexism, classism, and body-shaming within the United States, see Bridges (2019) for some closer analyses and discussions of *-splain* language that illuminate intersectionality and varying levels of moral legitimacy.

Pizzighella and Noy. Its capacity to uncover how language is used to do things to the lexicon, to its speakers, to its listeners, and to the world around them is demonstrated in ideas from Fultner, Cooren, and Noy. How we can connect this linguistic behavior of metapragmatic neology to other lexical reconfigurations and to sociopolitical strategies is demonstrated by Marqueta Gracia and by Lutzky and Lawson. These scholars' work continues to show the value of thinking about words as active participants of dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological ontologies. I hope that this dialogue has been as productive as I believe it to be, and I want to thank once more all the respondents for their contributions. It is also my hope that the conversation will continue in new ways, and that scholars studying language will keep learning from one another's methods and perspectives.

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