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.

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[1]. 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[2]. 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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[1] 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.

[2] 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 (Diggit, 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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