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.

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 spere* 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 discoursal 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 metapragmaticians (as I mentioned before), and in part because they are also "conversation analysists" 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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