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[X]splaininggender, race, class, and body: Metapragmatic disputes of linguistic authority and ideologies on Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr

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*[X]splain*ing gender, race, class, and body:

Metapragmatic disputes of linguistic authority and ideologies on Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Linguistics and Applied Language Studies
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social network sites, neologisms, gender, race, class, body

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family.

To my mother, Rosemary Darbon, who inspired my passion for learning, teaching, and serving others.

To my father, James Louis, who taught me the virtues of hard work, and of integrating imagination and artistry into one's work.

To my big sis, Danae, from whom I learned to be rebellious and to laugh at life's absurdities.

And to Adell, my closest friend since we split into two zygotes, whose energy I feel, always.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the language of “citizen sociolinguists,” everyday users of social network sites (SNS) who contribute to the discourses about language on Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr, platforms with distinctive user demographics and technological affordances. The data were collected through keyword searches for *mansplain*, *whitesplain*, *richsplain* and *thinsplain*, metapragmatic neologisms which are lexical blends of the verb *explain* and one of four social categories. Disputes of macro-level ideologies are revealed by users’ creative meaning-making strategies and metapragmatic awareness of micro-level texts and utterances. Making use of the linguistic practices of the SNS, as well as the concisely-compacted semantic and pragmatic meanings of the four *splain* words, users come to evaluate communicative dynamics between speakers who differ from or relate with others in their experiences of sex, skin color, economic status, and physical form. Drawing on elements of Citizen Sociolinguistics (Rymes & Leone, 2014) with Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989) and Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (Herring, 2004), I question how users make metapragmatic judgements to convey varying meanings of the four focal words, and how the uses of *[x]splain* and the surrounding discourses illuminate socio-ideological values about language, about its intersection with gender, race, class, and body size, and the authority to speak on topics that are macro-contextually situated in discourses of privilege, power, and inequality. Lastly, I compare the findings across the three SNS platforms to understand how competing discourses differ in relation to each site’s user demographics, technological affordances and limitations, and subsequent linguistic practices.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

When NASA astronaut and physiologist Jessica Meir posted about the complexities of physics beyond the Earth's atmosphere, the response from one male Twitter user seemingly aimed to contradict and instructively correct Meir in a manner identified by other Twitter users as an 'I-know-better-than-you' condescension, an action commonly labeled as *mansplaining*. A portmanteau of *man* and *explain*, the term recently popularized on social media generally refers to a man patronizingly telling a female about a topic she already understands. After a fellow physicist re-tweeted the incident with the caption "Man mansplains space to astronaut," the story of such a "hilariously absurd" (Amatulli, 2016) example of *mansplaining* quickly went viral.

@ASTRO_JESSICA: My first venture >63,000', the space equivalent zone, where water spontaneously boils! Luckily I'm suited!

@CASEYOQUIN: @Astro_Jessica wouldn't say it's spontaneous. The pressure in the room got below the vapor pressure of the water at room temp. Simple thermos

The ensuing ridicule spread across multiple networks: comments from @Astro_Jessica's¹ followers flooded in, and screenshots were shared with multiple online news media sites like *BuzzFeed* who frequently report on trending social-media activity. The cross-platform talk generated endless responses from users in the comments sections in numerous media platforms, with the term *mansplain* strewn throughout, used both as a linguistic tool in the commentaries, and as the subject of dozens of meta-commentaries.

¹ Because the story of @Astro_Jessica and @CASEYOQUIN was a viral story shared on numerous news sites (e.g., Amatulli, 2016), the usernames here are not anonymized. However, for my own data presented in the chapters four and five, the usernames and profiles are replaced with pseudonyms.

In the user comments, what can be observed are hundreds of interwoven ideological threads that underlie the ways that men and women speak to one another. As the term *mansplain* irrevocably entwines gender into the story, ensuing discussions on the tweets then lapsed into disputes of whether the man's science was inaccurate, and reasons why his comment was inappropriate. Further ideologies emerge in the continuous unfolding of comments, joining together to construct a set of mutual discourses on gender and linguistic pragmatics, where various types of opinions are embraced by various types of individuals. On the one hand, some Twitter comments tell of a perception of feminist hostility – or as one user playfully calls it, “an ovary-action” – for instance: *It's sad that man-bashing started because he dared to comment on her tweet.* On the other hand, comments connect the man's correction with broad institutional imbalances (e.g., *What's the line again about women needing to be twice as qualified to get half the credit?*) and additional frustrations about men's talk towards women via sarcasm: *This lesson went well I think. But you should have told her to smile more. Women love that.*

The popularity of the term *mansplain* has inspired dozens of imitations marking undermining, presumptuous, and/or incorrect explanations by way of the {*-splain*} affix. For example, *When people go on and on about what happened during hurricane katrina to people who were actually here #katrinasplain.*” Affixing *splain* to *Katrina* creates a denotation to very expediently refer to any language on the events of Katrina, by speakers without firsthand experience, to sufferers of the disaster. The term *katrinasplain* derives its meaning from other *splain* terms to communicate an annoyance towards the language described therein. And more severely (even if the discourse is playful), the *-splain* affix can serve to accuse a speaker of obliviousness and ignorance with charges of devaluing voices that speak from a position of epistemic validity. In other words, *splain* words can be used to describe language that carelessly

disregards the cultural identity and/or knowledge of the speaker's interlocutor, making them powerful linguistic tools that can understandably cause distress for speakers who feel they are unwittingly faulted for such offenses.

Other *splain* variations e.g., *whitesplain*, *straightsplain*, or *thinsplain*, to name just a few, have continued to appear frequently in social media dialogue, articulating the consequences of a culture that values certain people over others. 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 affixed to certain labels for social groups, such as those describing gender (*mansplain*, *womansplain*), race (*whitesplain*, *asiansplain*), or sexual orientation (*straightsplain*, *gaysplain*).

The goals of this study are to explore users' linguistic inventiveness, specifically how they employ various words affixed with *-splain* to discuss their observations of how members of different social groups talk to one another. It investigates the metapragmatic functions and meaning-making resources of users' discourse on and around four different *splain* words from three social-networking sites (SNS): Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr. Ultimately, the aim is to explore the social and linguistic ideologies, as well as understanding hegemonic relations that emerge from the users' linguistic practices and discussions of *splain* language. As *splain* language is at the core of this study, other lexemes of *[x]splain* may at times appear, such as *mansplanation* (*man+explanation*), *[x]splainer* (a speaker producing *[x]splain* language). It should also be noted that the lemma *splain* will be italicized throughout this document when the word is referred to meta-linguistically, but not when referencing the action that the word describes, e.g., "he mansplained the word *mansplain*."

Stories and perspectives depicted by way of *splain* words are prevalent on social media, as there is no shortage of users willing to confront acts perceived as inappropriate. Retaliation against acts of [x]splainings sits in a larger context of so-called Internet vigilantism (Jane, 2016), in which social networks become tools to publicize occurrences of behavior perceived as disruptive or inappropriate, especially when it is towards a marginalized group. The phenomenon of “digilantism” (i.e., digital vigilantism) comes from individuals confronting others for their behavior in an attempt to ensure that behavior is remedied. The prevalence of the act has made it customary in online culture, as suggested in one popular label: *call-out culture*, which is expressed as an act in SNS to publicly point out instances of oppressive language use, perceived to be prejudiced or reinforcing negative stereotypes (Munro, 2013). The publicizing of acts regarded as anti-social usually sets in motion a backlash of counterarguments, consequently and inversely labeling such acts of language regulation as ones of intolerance and oppression.

Splain stories like that of @Astro_Jessica’s underscore several dimensions of *splain*-based discourses prevalent in social media. First of all, it shows that *splain* words in digital communication can have ripple effects that reach far wider than what may be directly visible: the labeling of others’ language as *splainings* and the subsequent reactions can provoke users to reflexively consider the appropriateness of their own and others’ language, whether instructive or corrective language is justified or unjustified, as well as their own outlook on the impact of language in a given environment. In the case of an individual challenging the inappropriateness of another’s language, users have subjective and sometimes righteous ideas of what they feel is the most suitable way to speak. Therefore, an ethical dilemma is observed with arguments for fairness made on both sides: on the one hand, “*it was mansplaining*” and on the other hand, “*it was just being pedantic.*” In other words, in all forms of ‘digilantism’, parallel arguments

materialize on whether pointing out repressive language is a moral act of standing for justice or an encroachment on the right to share opinions. Such disputes can ultimately conjure diverse stances, attempting to justify boundaries of defying verbal oppression or silencing others, and the boundaries of free speech and censorship. Despite opposing viewpoints being unlikely to reconcile, these sociocultural realities can be considered “folk ideologies” (Silverstein, 1979) which are crucial to consider if we want to understand users’ discursive behavior and the viewpoints it communicates. By way of recurrent dualistic notions – e.g., privileged/oppressed, tolerance/prejudice, reformism/status quo and the legitimacy/danger of *splain* words – arguments of similar nature can co-occur in various “sociolinguistic scales” (Blommaert, 2015, p. 32). That is, unique one-time acts of labeling specific instances of speech as *splain* are only understood through their connection with other related dialogues, connecting the individual case to a larger collective understanding, the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro.’ Discussions on appropriateness of sharing facts and opinions thus may evolve into polarized disputes, which then connect to broader issues regarding ideologies of the social landscape and issues of power dynamics between various groups.

Additionally, ideologies related to publicly judging others’ behaviors present various positions with particular characteristics, “enregistering” (Agha, 2005) *splain* discourse as patterns of linguistic action that connect diverse “cultural models of action that link diverse behavioral signs to enactable effects” (p. 145). The socially-deictic² relationships between the act of labeling perceived linguistic improprieties by way of the *splain* affix, and the act of condemning the usage of *splain* words, signifies that a debate about a certain offense is always more than a debate about that offense. *Splain* discourses are also manifestations of sociopolitical

² Social deixis are elements in communication that rely on context to point out some type of social role or distinction (Levinson, 1979).

viewpoints that collectively work to reinforce and/or readjust what is socially-recognized as (in)appropriate ways to use language. Everyday linguistic interactions are situated encounters between individuals with various linguistic resources and abilities, in a way that all communicative exchanges, no matter how subjective and trivial they may appear, manifest vestiges of the social structure that it both communicates and perpetuates (Bourdieu, 1991).

Further, when users participate in discussions on *splaining*, they are performing what Rymes (2014) calls “Citizen Sociolinguistics.” They are publicly evaluating the linguistic world around them and using the participatory culture of social media to contribute to “patterns of stability in the social valuation of language” and “the relative value of certain ways of speaking” (p. 38). Consequently, the more people discuss sociopragmatic standards³ as seen in user comments on *splain* language in social media, the further the social value of challenging such behavior is developed. To put it simply, publicizing instances of perceived inappropriate language online is a method of identity construction for those who ‘call out’ offenses, which can lead to increased recognition by ordinary citizens that some users are willing to point out inappropriate language. This act of language regulation can then be viewed as part of the communicative conventions of social media, eventually prompting some users to question and challenge imbalances in social norms from which the language is borne.

Lastly, and most significantly for the current study, *splain* incidents emphasize the power of language, not only as a tool for debates on social issues, but as an object to be discussed as users take part in metapragmatic discussions. The resulting discussions address what is appropriate to say by certain people in certain contexts, and how it should or should not be said. In conversations about speech that is viewed as *splaining* in some way, users discuss and dispute

³ Sociopragmatics deals with sociocultural knowledge and perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior (Kasper & Roever, 2005).

specific aspects of language at the lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic level, and the appropriate usage of various linguistic elements for a certain genre, audience or situation. Initial arguments about what the male Twitter user said to the NASA astronaut did not concentrate on gendered imbalances in language, but rather on the specific *splain* language. Metasemantic discussions (e.g., whether “Well, *actually...*” indexes *splain*ing) tend to develop into debates of wider issues: the consequences of an entire gender, race, or other social group being incorporated into a word; the areas where inequalities exist in the overall social psyche; opinions of how to approach uncivil language in social media; how media sparks and fuels rivalries between groups of people; and perceptions of social activism as movements towards social equality or as hypersensitive protests unnecessarily enflaming disputes. In other words, discourses that are ostensibly localized and specific to a single instance serve in the function of self-reflexive indexing that contributes to both challenges and reinforcements of widespread ideologies. Therefore, discussions on individual linguistic elements can often transpire into discussions about the power of how we shape our language to progress or protect social values.

Everyday language users’ understandings of what kinds of speech should or should not be allowed expose the role that language plays in the construction of practically any social issue. Specifically, this study explores what is culturally valued in terms of how individuals from certain social groups talk to one another. The study focuses on metapragmatic language in online discourse, with the affix *splain* at its core, to investigate ideologies that reside at the intersection of language and social roles. 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 weight of these ideologies is attested to by the prevalence of social media battles regarding *splain* language, and they are a worthwhile object to investigate if

we wish to grasp what social values people assign to their own and others' language use across various online networking platforms. The study is outlined below.

Metapragmatics

At the core of this study is the notion of metapragmatics. In order to fully address how users perform metapragmatic acts in discourse on or about *splain* language in social media discourse, it is vital to achieve an understanding of metapragmatics more generally. Chapter 2 will more robustly cover the development of metapragmatics as an area of linguistic anthropological study, and a review of the literature; but here, I offer preliminary definitions.

Metalanguage refers to speaking “about speech, that is, to use language to communicate about the activity of using language” (Lucy, 1993, p. 9). A specific subdomain of metalanguage is metapragmatics: speech about what language is doing in a particular 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., users' rules – are meant to hold (Mey, 1993; Verschueren, 1995).

Mansplain and the variants that it inspired are examples of inherently metapragmatic words. That is, these terms point to language while simultaneously evaluating its pragmatic appropriateness. Referring to an instance of language use as a type of *splain* refers to a specific type of linguistic behavior while evaluating it as arrogant, inappropriate, and/or oppressive language. Thus, 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). 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.

The field of metapragmatics is an interdisciplinary and extensive one, as metapragmatic speech is ubiquitous in language (Bublitz & Hübler, 2007; Lucy, 1993; Verschueren, 1995, 2000). Metapragmatics deals with the dual structure of talk, the message communicated in discourse, and the linguistic code used to transmit that message. Numerous scholars have attempted to systematize metapragmatic language in various ways (e.g., Caffi, 1994; Hübler & Bublitz, 2007; Silverstein 1976, 1981; Verschueren 1985, 1989); however only some aspects of this reflexive language are relevant to this proposed study.

The first is “management of discourse” as described by Caffi (1994, p. 2461), and refers to speakers’ competence in reflecting judgments of appropriateness both in their own speech, as well as the language of others. An example is when a speaker says “Don’t get me wrong...” which imparts that she is reflexively commenting on the risk that her listener may not understand her intentions or may not agree with the speech surrounding the expression. Being aware of potential disagreement or offense is a metapragmatic skill that allows speakers to manage their language in a way that their messages are interpreted in the intended manner.

This need for speakers to be able to manage discourse is closely intertwined with the second aspect of “metapragmatics of interest,” which is a tool for identity construction. Metapragmatic action is always a performance through which people construct identities, considerably so through indexically positioning themselves as a particular *type* of person or

belonging to a certain social group. As an example (from Bridges, 2017), consider the tweet below in which the user is referencing a petition to repeal an amendment in the Irish constitution that bans abortions:

Let's start a citizens assembly!! Let's have men "experts" mansplain to the women how they are doing womaning wrong #repealthe8th

Identity work is observable in the user's metapragmatic decision to put the word *experts* in quotation marks. Word or words in quotes can be used to reference the meaning of the word or other uses of it. The use of so-called "scare quotes" is therefore a metapragmatic act, simultaneously using the word for its content in the text and referencing its semantic meaning. In the tweet above, the use of scare quotes explicitly communicates a disparity between the function of the word in the text, and its usual definition. As McArthur (1992) states, scare quotes around a word perform as "a warning to the reader that there is something unusual or dubious (in the opinion of the writer) about the quoted word" (p. 839). Alongside the decision to use *mansplain*, the Twitter user's use of *experts*, as opposed to a vaguer term like *people*, allows for the image of a hypothetical assembly of men considering themselves experts on the topic. The scare quotes allow her to reference the men's self-assessment of expertise, while concurrently conveying her own critique that they could be experts on "womaning." To put it simply, she presents herself as someone who does not think men should speak with the confidence of an expert on matters only experienced by women.

Lastly, metapragmatic actions can perform as reflections on the conditions of speech and speech forms, and respond to wider contexts and social transformations, while simultaneously contributing to highly calibrated orders of indexicality (i.e., standardized relationships between language forms and social meanings). Language users are able to point out what they believe language is doing in a certain context; for instance, they may point out euphemistic expressions

that do not merely sugarcoat a harsher reality, but are tools of deception (e.g., “alternative facts”), or they may regard political correctness as language that protects citizens or as language that silences them. What speakers say language is doing depends on the content, the context, and their social group memberships. Silverstein (1981) and Verschueren (1995) describe various levels of metapragmatic awareness that speakers have, which creates folk ideologies of language and pragmatics. For example, there are folk ideologies that argue “no problem” is an unacceptable response to “thank you” (Blasingame, 2014), or that “you guys” as a plural of *you* is sexist (Jasz, 2015).

These three aspects of metapragmatics highlighted here as relevant to *splain* language and *call-out culture* more generally are not necessarily separate categories. Any instance of metapragmatic speech can accomplish any or all of these functions. If a speaker, for example, points out that it is insulting for his interlocutor’s use of “gay” to denote an unpleasant situation, he is simultaneously managing his interlocutor’s discourse, identifying himself as a certain type of citizen (e.g., an ally to the gay community), while responding to social changes in which the LGBTQ community is demanding more acceptance and gaining more civil rights in the world. In summary, the aspects of metapragmatics central to this proposal are the ways language users manage discourse, what their discourse management says about their identity, and how that identity work contributes to the construction or preservation of what is socially valuable.

Pragmatics and the Sociability of the Internet

This study investigates social media; therefore, outlining the parameters of Internet communication and the ways that people interact on social media is essential. The affordances and limitations of online discourse has resulted in seismic shifts in the discursive resources that individuals use to present, construct, and perform their identities. Thus, for scholars interested in

social identity and how language reveals broader social ideologies, computer-mediated discourse (CMD) serves as a prolific source of human communication (Jones, Chik, & Hafner, 2015; Tagg, 2015). Below I address how discourse practices have been transformed in digital communication to demonstrate that the Internet matters to a great extent in studying and understanding the norms and values of societies.

In the early years of the Internet, there were hopes that it might provide an environment where voices are egalitarian and disembodied from their real-world counterparts (Tagg, 2015). In the initial developments of the World Wide Web, the technology was limited to predominantly one-way information. Interactive functions were restricted to private modes like email, and public chatrooms where pseudonyms were the norm (Soukup, 1999). The general perception of the Internet – one shared by architects of digital spaces and its users alike – was of a space that could conceal distinctions of gender, age, race, class, or nationality to which we are bound in the physical world. Faceless, text-based interactions were seen to diminish dimensions of social differentiations that divide and discriminate in offline interactions.

Around 2004, however, the Internet shifted from the static, “readable,” and mostly unidirectional network of information to the collaborative and dynamic “writable” Internet characterized by user-generated content, known as Web 2.0. One of the fundamental characteristics of the new web was the advent of social media, which allowed users to interact and participate freely in information sharing. This shift in the use and practice of the Internet was fueled by social networking websites like Facebook becoming increasingly popular, surpassing the early-Internet environments of chat rooms and flat data. Now, in addition to a source of information, the Internet serves as a source of sociability through unprecedented interpersonal connections, and a shift from private domains of communication to more public ones. As Tagg

(2015) states, today the Internet and social media are nearly synonymous, and the Internet is also deeply embedded in face-to-face social life.

Social spaces of today's Internet can be thought of as multiple, intersecting *communities of practice*: spaces of "mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98), which overlap with offline, more conventional communities of practice. With and without intention, our face-to-face selves merge with our electronically mediated selves: "self-presentation online is less about creating new identities and more about playing with and foregrounding particular aspects of an 'authentic' offline identity" (Tagg, 2015, p. 61). Consequently, while it was hoped that the Internet of the 1990s might strip away social differences and inequalities, the social media post-2004 shows who we are and with whom we are connected. Scholars of Internet discourse have found that offline social identities are performed online and also entwine with constructing authenticity of online identities (Herring & Androusopolous, 2015; Jones, et al., 2015; Tagg, 2015).

Users' age, race, and gender are often self-disclosed in their SNS biographies or in the posts or comments they publish. Nonetheless, there still exists a disembodiment or physical remove in digital discourse that can allow for a transgression of communicative norms in online participation that users might repress in traditional conversation (Barton & Lee, 2013; Dąbrowska, 2014; Demeurt, 2014; Tagg, 2015). Even on SNS where a name and profile are linked to what users post, there is still a sense of disassociation strong enough that users may feel a sense of liberty to act in more extreme ways than in the offline world. In other words, despite social media accounts being linked to who individuals are in the real world, there is still a *perception* of anonymity, of 'hiding behind the screen,' that emboldens some users to express opinions with candidness and disinhibition that they may never dare to share in face-to-face

settings. As Hardaker and McGlashan (2016) put it, “Users may experience a sense of disinhibition such that they become willing to express opinions online that they would never voice if they knew that those opinions could be attributed to them offline” (p. 82). The heightened levels of incivility that come with the freedom of expression and disembodied nature of some digital spaces has been well-documented in media studies (e.g., Barlett, Gentile, & Chew, 2016; Chen, 2017; Omernick & Sood, 2013; Santana, 2014), and is widely recognized in popular media to be a reality of the Internet (e.g., Boyd, 2014; Konnikova, 2013). According to Tagg (2015), the disembodiment associated with digital discourse has the power to make situations where “people are no longer inhibited from becoming aggressive and they do not feel themselves to be accountable for their actions” (p. 86), facilitating a range of antisocial communicative acts found online such as trolling, flaming, cyberbullying, doxing, scamming, and spamming⁴ to name a few. This element of perceived (semi-)anonymity in online discourse goes hand in hand with *call-out culture* and *digilantism*, born partially in response to the pervasiveness of such disruptive behaviors.

Taking into account that people’s social differences are not anonymized but can indeed become centralized in much of Web 2.0 – as well as the prejudices, inequalities, and power differentials between social groups – then the prevalence of *splain* language must be investigated in a way that encompasses the tools, parameters, and practices of online communication.

⁴ - *Trolling* – an attempt to disrupt an online discussion by posting aggressive, provocative or unwelcome messages. Trollers’ intentions are rarely overtly marked as they often attempt to deceive others into thinking they are sincere, naïve or that they genuinely hold the controversial views they espouse (Tagg, 2015, p. 250).
- *Flaming* is hostile, obscene or aggressive behavior occurring online (Tagg, 2015, p. 243).
- *Cyberbullying* refers to the repeated online targeting of a particular institution or individual in a hostile, aggressive, or unwanted way which is intended to cause harm or upset (Tagg, 2015, p. 241).
- *Doxing* or doxing, from the abbreviation of document in *.docx* is “the Internet-based practice of researching and broadcasting private or identifiable information (especially personally identifiable information) about an individual or organization” (Goldman, 2014).

Investigating CMD, then, involves how users communicate values of speaking to or about members of certain groups, and how their awareness of language use motivates them to do so. Such inquiry also includes examining the discursive means by which users' identities are performed and constructed within the varying affordances, limitations, and the user demographics that have transpired on different SNS.

On another note, Tagg (2015) brings up the fact that “physical distance might encourage cruelty – but it can also give people a safe space in which to self-disclose and share personal information they might be reluctant to share face-to-face” (p. 87). For example, in responses to a comment labelled as *thinsplaining* on Reddit, users defended or challenged the label based on personal stories of struggling with weight gain and loss, and then sharing affiliative responses to strangers' narratives. In other words, the motivation behind some users' willingness to ‘call out’ others for *[x]splaining* may have less to do with the dissociative aspects of the Internet, and may instead be understood as “an extension of how people perceive themselves,” showing how their online behavior is “deeply embedded into their offline lives” (Tagg, 2015, p. 87), and vice-versa.

Language is powerful in its capacity to motivate and provoke people – to act as informed citizens; to feel empathy, anger, or contempt; and to identify, gather, protest, or riot; and people often discuss how language accomplishes this. Any users engaging in *splain* labeling, and any users opposing these terms as “linguistic weapons,” are using language to discuss language. Like the notions of *call-out culture* and *digilantism*, classifying others' comments as *splaining* – specifically, a sort of privileged explaining – has several dimensions, ranging from well-intended motivations to spotlight harmful language via wordplay, to deliberate attempts to shame someone publically for narcissism, intolerance, or “politically incorrect” thinking. Regardless of the intentions, many users' view *splain* words as linguistic weapons of censorship that infringe

on the status quo, or even the values of free speech. The ideas and objectives of pointing out oppression are recognized by many as needed and valued (e.g., Mertz-Bovy, 2016; Penny, 2015; Rodriguez, 2016), while others argue that it only intensifies disagreements (e.g., Ahmad, 2015; Jane, 2016; Stryker, 2016). Nonetheless, language policing behavior and its opposition are fundamentally metapragmatic practices. Considering that metapragmatic speech is when “talk about talk” performs a commentary on what language is doing and the social significance in a particular context, *splain*-based discussions on the limits or limitlessness of voicing ideas, and what type of speech should or should not be forbidden and why, is in itself metapragmatic language.

I discuss *splain* language in conjunction with the larger phenomenon of *call-out culture* to make the point that in any topic of discussion, or for any purpose or in setting of language, speakers metapragmatic awareness enables their self-positioning in the world, and the ability to make sense of their alignment with others and their understanding of the world in general. My interests are not in how language users sort their arguments into categories of ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ but rather how these disputes uncover various understandings about the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable language.

This study interrogates and explores social values of discussing others’ language use in accordance to social identities and their social status through inventive *splain*-based wordplay in CMD. It investigates these metapragmatic strategies across three social-networking sites with diverse technological affordances and constraints as well as user demographics: Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit. Specifically, on each social media site, I explore four *splain* words, how people use them, what they say about discussing other’s language use more generally. Combining discourse analysis and Citizen Sociolinguistics (Rymes, 2014), I examine the uses and the meanings of

splain language in the posts, tweets, or comments, as well as what metapragmatic resources the users employ. Issues of social ideologies, identity construction, and hegemony are discussed from the users' linguistic practices around *splain* language.

Digital Discourse Research

The previous section touched on how discourse practices have been influenced by the affordances of Web 2.0, and how *splain* discourse is situated in CMD. In addition to our methods of communication shifting in significant ways, the advancement of digital technologies has influenced the extent to which globalization and superdiversity play a role in communication (Blommaert, 2010). The mass-information and globally networked participatory affordances of the web has led to an unparalleled potential for Internet users to be exposed not only to linguistic forms, but to entire sociocultural realities beyond their own individual experiences and encounters. Subsequently, not only have the ways we communicate changed, but the way we understand how others communicate have changed (Fang, 2008).

As a result, with any advancement in communicative technology, new methods of mediated communication challenge the foundational theories that sociolinguists and discourse analysts have established for examining traditional, analogue language use. As CMC scholars point out, digital communication is transforming basic understandings of what constitutes language and how to approach concepts such as meaning-making strategies in multimodal discourse, the processes of social interactions, the boundaries of discourse communities, and the authenticity of authorship (Androutsopoulos, 2011; Fang, 2008; Jones et al., 2015; Tagg, 2015). In order to keep up with the type of connectivity, internationalism, and participatory culture of Web 2.0, which includes greater exposure of linguistic creativity and critiques of language use, Rymes and Leone (2014) proposed a corresponding notion of "Social Science 2.0" which aids

researchers “to account for and partake in the social demands and affordances of massive mobility and connectivity in today’s world” (p. 27). Similarly, Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) introduce what they call “Discourse 2.0”, i.e., discourse in new technological environments that produce new kinds of multimodal content (p. 130).

Jones et al. (2015) explain how discourse analysis, through varying approaches and methodologies, all ultimately aim to understand how four elements of discourse – (1) texts, (2) contexts, (3) actions and interactions, and (4) power and ideology – work together and influence one another, and how these elements of micro-level discourse reveal and preserve various macro-level ideologies and relationships of power. Discourse analysis (DA) studies how different texts, contexts, actions/interactions, and power relationships “affect the kinds of meanings people can make in different situations, the kinds of actions they can perform, the kinds of relationships they can form, and the kinds of people they can be” (p. 4). For researchers of digital practices, the same four elements are investigated, however digital DA approaches how different “technologies of entextualization” (Jones, 2009, p. 287) alter how analysts must understand and define these four elements. For example, varying social media platforms result in different kinds of texts that allow people to have interactions different from those of ‘old media’ such as by interlinking discourse with hashtags, or how new contexts of online discourse disrupt traditional cultural expectations about how people should behave in certain situations.

The current study thus bears in mind the re-evaluation of approaching text, context, interaction, and power as they are arranged in the multi-modal practices of digital discourse. I consider how the digital contexts allow for new structures of interaction and construction of social ideologies.

Splain in Three Distinctive Platforms

Social media, as stated above, has become synonymous with the Internet since the shift to Web 2.0 (Tagg, 2015, p. 61). The diversity of social media makes a definition challenging (Obar & Wildman, 2015). The idea of social media is frequently confused with the more focused notion of *social network sites* (boyd⁵ & Ellison, 2008). Researchers differentiate social media from social networking sites, where social media is all electronic media facilitating “interactivity, mobility, abundance, and multi-mediality” (Schejter & Tirosh, 2015, p. 796) where people create online communities to share information, including instant messaging, websites with comment functions, and smartphone apps like Whatsapp and SnapChat (Tagg, 2015). Social network sites (SNS) exist within the umbrella of social media in general, characterized by networks of interlinked member profiles where viewing and searching profiles and links between profiles is possible (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The appellation of *social network* over *social networking* is a deliberate one, differentiating between the idea of *networking* as the formation of new social relationships, and that of *networks*, where – like in SNS – relationships between linked users already exist (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211).

There are hundreds of SNS with various purposes (e.g., LinkedIn for business and employment, Instagram for photo sharing, GoodReads for library cataloguing); appealing to various social groups of users (e.g., CafeMom for mothers, Codias for conservatives), and a variety of interests and practices (e.g., Exploroo for travelers, Taltopia for artists). For all SNS, user-generated content is a necessity, as user participation through liking, posting, commenting, and sharing, plus increasing interconnectivity with other users, make up the lifeblood of SNS

⁵ danah boyd legally changed her name to all lowercase letters for several reasons including to protest language conventions and to “frame her own name as she sees fit” (Gorichanaz, 2012).

that, as Obar and Wildman explain, keep SNS from going the way of MySpace, i.e., an online “ghost town” (p. 747). As users participate and generate content, they continually co-construct and cooperatively style and restyle the character of the SNS. Even – or perhaps especially – sites that cater to general audiences can gradually find themselves comprised by a large presence of a particular demographic, or of users with a shared lifestyle or belief. For instance, based on an analysis of the trending topics and reciprocity of retweets on the entire Twittersphere, Kwak, Lee, Park, and Moon (2010) argue for the characterization of the micro-blogging social network service as a news media site more so than a general SNS. Seven years later, that characterization remains as convincing, considering journalists make up 25% of the verified Twitter accounts (Newberry, 2016), and current event articles published by news press sites like *The Huffington Post* and *BuzzFeed* are frequently composed by a type of “citizen journalism,” that is, strictly by reporting on how people have discussed the event on Twitter, rather than the traditional journalistic reporting of a story (e.g., “‘The Big Bang Theory’ star's op-ed about Harvey Weinstein sparks outrage on Twitter” an online news article from *Business Insider* which tells the story through screen shots of Twitter users’ tweets, adding short annotations in between, Sheth, 2017; see also Stopera, 2018). As another example, there are some arguments that an “echo chamber” effect can be recognized on *YouTube.com*, characterizing the site as the national talk radio of the new right-wing (Hermann, 2017; Whyman, 2017). Tumblr, too, established as a micro-blogging site for general audiences, has become a favorite platform for feminist dialogue and activism for injustice awareness and social equality (Connelly, 2015), and characterized by “lively and combative left-wing politics” (Hermann, 2017).

Below, I introduce the interactional dynamics of Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit, the distinct communicative affordances of the sites, and the rationale for selecting these three SNS to

investigate *splain* language. Introduced first by Gibson (1986), *affordances* refer to the capabilities and constraints of new technologies, such as the practice of “status updating” on Facebook, and for other connected users to comment on, or react with an emotion such as “like,” “love,” “sad,” or “angry”. In online communication, the manners in which individuals employ the affordances of SNS significantly impact the linguistic resources they apply, and the construction of their interaction (Seargent, Tagg, & Ngampramuan, 2015). Choosing Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit over other SNS is a decision based on several factors. First, these platforms offer diverse affordances, limitations, and user demographics, allowing the study to consider potential differences in language practices across the sites. Secondly, the study focuses primarily on language practices in the written form; therefore, while all three of these sites allow image, audio, and video functions, user communication is predominantly textual, unlike photosharing and imageboard SNS like Instagram, Flickr, and Pinterest. Thirdly, advanced search functions are available on these sites, making it possible to explore usages of words, strings of words, hashtags, people, and emoticons, as well as limit search results to particular time frames, users, and languages.

Twitter. Twitter, a micro-blogging SNS, was launched in July 2006 (Twitter, 2017a) and achieved global popularity and has been one of the most frequently-visited sites (Alexa, 2017), with over 320 million active monthly users (Twitter, 2017a). In 2016, users tweeted nearly 200 billion times, equating to about 6,000 tweets per second (Sayce, 2017). Users can tweet from their computer, their smartphone app, or by sending a text message to Twitter, making it “the SMS of the Interent” (D’Monte, 2009).

One of the defining characteristics of Twitter is 280-character limit, which can consist of text, hyperlinks to other sites, hashtags, links to other Twitter accounts with @, or emojis, often

compelling Twitter users to resort to linguistic creativity, such as spelling variations as meaning-making resources (Tagg, 2015). Users can make their tweets private; however, tweets are by default public and therefore any text or hashtag in the tweet is searchable via Twitter’s search function. A sample tweet, presented in Figure 1, shows the user’s profile photo, name, Twitter ID, how long ago the tweet was sent, and clickable text (hashtags, other users, and hyperlinks).

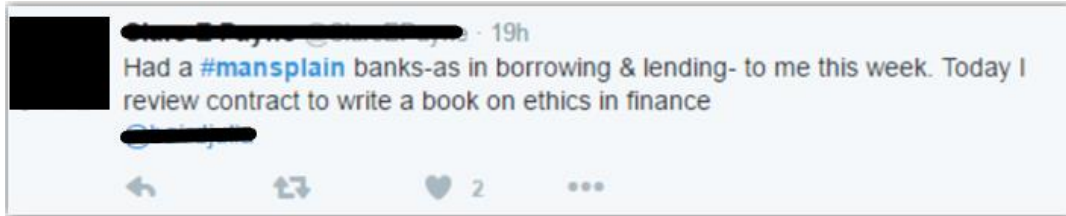


Figure 1: Sample tweet

In tweets of 280 characters or less, users broadcast in real time to their followers, that is, other users who subscribe to their tweets. Twitterers’ homepages are comprised of the “feed”, or real-time stream of tweets posted by their followers. Figure 2 displays a sample Twitter feed.

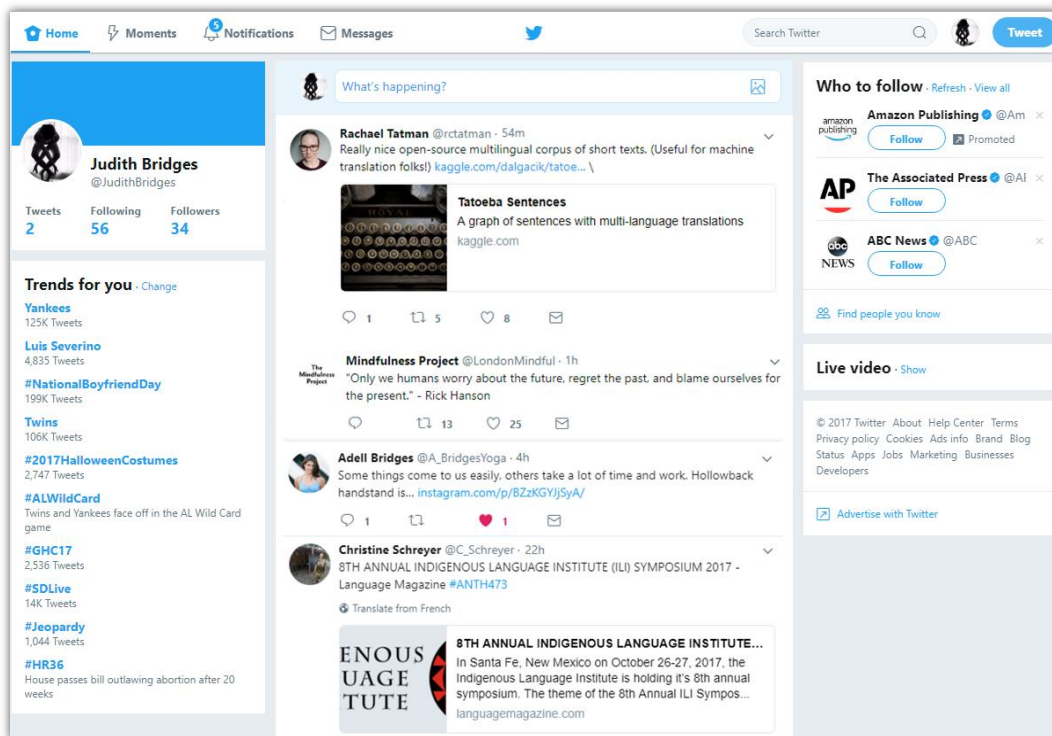


Figure 2: Sample Twitter feed

Twitter users must either abide by the 280-character limit or find other ways to communicate their point. Some methods include posting multiple tweets, hyperlinking to an external webpage or SNS, or posting an image with text, such as a meme or a screenshot of text, thus allowing users' tweets to have multi-modal and cross-platform elements.



Figure 3: Sample tweet showing four interactive functions

Interaction between users on Twitter includes following other users to engage with all of their activity, as well as reacting in a number of ways to individual tweets. For example, users can (a) reply to the tweet, as shown in Figure 3 with the speech bubble icon; (b) retweet it, i.e., share it on their own feed to their followers with the option of adding their own comment, which is done by clicking on the two inter-pointing arrows; or (c) click the heart to show affiliation. Users can also (d) send a private message about the tweet to its author by clicking on the envelope icon, but the number of private messages is not displayed publicly. Figure 3 shows the number of replies, retweets, and hearts on a tweet by model and TV personality Chrissy Teigen regarding the doubling of the character limit for users selected by Twitter.

When users reply or retweet, it is possible to view the entire dialogue by clicking on the tweet. For example, I came across a tweet using the word “customersplain” in which the author is replying to another Twitter user. By clicking on the tweet, the entire interaction is revealed, with the original tweet at the top, and the subsequent interactions displayed below chronologically (Figure 4). In this example, the interchange is between two users, but any

number of users can participate in the conversation, as shown by Twitter’s invitation to “Tweet your reply” in the middle of the screen shot.



Figure 4: View of Twitter dialogic interaction among users

Reddit. Founded in 2005, the self-proclaimed “the homepage of the Internet” is a social entertainment and news aggregation site powered by creative user-generated content, “bridging communities and individuals with ideas, the latest digital trends, and breaking news (...okay, and maybe cats),” encouraging users to discover themselves and inspire others (Reddit, 2017). Registered redditors (members) post links that can contain images, memes, videos, or questions to pages known as subreddits, which other users vote and comment on. Based on “upvotes” or “downvotes” from other users, the most-upvoted content rises to the top for all redditors to see on their homepage. Figure 5 shows a post that was ranked fifth in the top trending reddits at the

time of the screenshot, with “Frog jump” as the link’s subject line, and a score of 8861 votes, a metric calculated as the sum of the upvotes minus the downvotes it has received. Each of these reddits, as shown in the example, also displays where the post came from (ImgUr), the redditor



Figure 5: Fifth top Reddit on homepage

HOME HOT NEW TOP

This is a subreddit dedicated to asking women for advice in relationships, dating, sex, or anything else related to women. We welcome anyone seeking advice of any aspect.

RULES FOR POSTING:

- This sub is about helping people in need - if you aren't doing that, and instead are posting abuse, meta arguments or going off on pointless tangents your comments may be removed.
- Ages and genders required!
- Spelling and grammar count!
- Linebreak early and often; avoid wall of text or 'txtspk'.
- Put TL;DR! - a brief summary at the end of your post. No "See title".
- Make your title relevant! No one reads posts with boring, generic titles.
- No photos, links, videos, or rage comics
- Please don't feed the trolls. Use the report button instead!
- Do not repost removed material - it was removed for a reason.
- Do not crosspost material you find here.
- No specifying majority demographics.
- No pot-stirring.
- No agenda questions. This is not your personal soapbox.

WE WILL NOT TOLERATE

Misogyny, misandry, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, racism, personal attacks, gendered slurs, graceless posts, comments generalizing gender, general asshole, or otherwise hateful commentary.

IMPORTANT

Posts, or comments that do not follow these requirements are subject to removal.

who posted it (Goal1), how long ago it was posted, in which subreddit it was posted, (r/aww: a subreddit of “things that make you go AWW”), and the number of comments it has received.

As of the last update of the site’s statistics at the end of 2016, there were 853,847 subreddits, of which 88,900 were actively used (Reddit, 2017). Anyone can create a subreddit, i.e., a community forum dedicated to any topic, such as r/ExplainItLikeImFive or r/ThisBlewMyMind. Each subreddit is independently regulated by volunteer users who create their own governing system within the subreddits, with do’s and don’t’s and clarification of consequences for violating the community laws. The rules for r/AskWomen are shown to the left in Figure 6.

Figure 6: User-generated rules for the subreddit AskWomen



Figure 7: Sample Reddit comment thread

Each post has a comments thread in which redditors pose opinions, discuss, and ask questions to other users and the original poster (Reddit, 2017). In each post, users can also upvote or downvote comments, as well as respond to them, creating threads and subthreads. Figure 7 shows how dialogic threads form in reddit comments.

Reddit remains an under-explored site in new media studies (Massanari, 2017). Reddit is a cultural platform that functions as a site for “citizen journalism”, and it is growing in popularity, as attested to by its number four rank in the currently most-visited sites in the U.S. (Alexa, 2017). Considering the broad range of interests and cultural topics discussed on Reddit, it can serve as a useful site for exploring how people discuss social values of linguistic norms.

Tumblr. Founded in 2007, Tumblr’s platform exists as a midpoint between Twitter (short microblogs with massive connectivity), and traditional blogging (longer posts, but smaller audiences.) As of autumn 2017, Tumblr boasts of 370.4 million blogs and 153.6 billion posts,

and is the largest micro-blogging site apart from Twitter. Like Reddit, and unlike Twitter, however, Tumblr remains underexplored in new media scholarship (Vásquez & Creel, 2017).

Initially intended for blogging, Tumblr's network structure is much denser with ten times the number of reciprocal connections between users than traditional blogs (Chang, Tang, Inagaki, & Liu, 2014). With the goal of creating a space for free expression, Tumblr's creator wished to avoid the daunting sight for a non-writer of an empty space for text construction (Walker, 2012). Thus, Tumblr permits users' posts to be in the form of text, photo, quote, link, chat, audio, and video, which can be originally created, or reblogged from other users. Figure 8 shows the seven different options that appear at the start of creating a new post.



Figure 8: Types of posts afforded on Tumblr

Unlike Twitter, Reddit, and other online social networks, Tumblr bloggers can only add commentary to others' posts through the function of "liking" or "reblogging" posts, making it appear in their own blog where they can add their own comments and content. This particular constraint on Tumblr discourages flaming and harassment; if users wish to say something hostile about another users' post, they must do so where it appears on their own blog. Consequently, as Connelley (2015) explains, Tumblr is an online space where identity and community formation can both take place. A sample Tumblr blog is shown in Figure 9, where the user makes use of multiple features such as reblogging, text, and images:

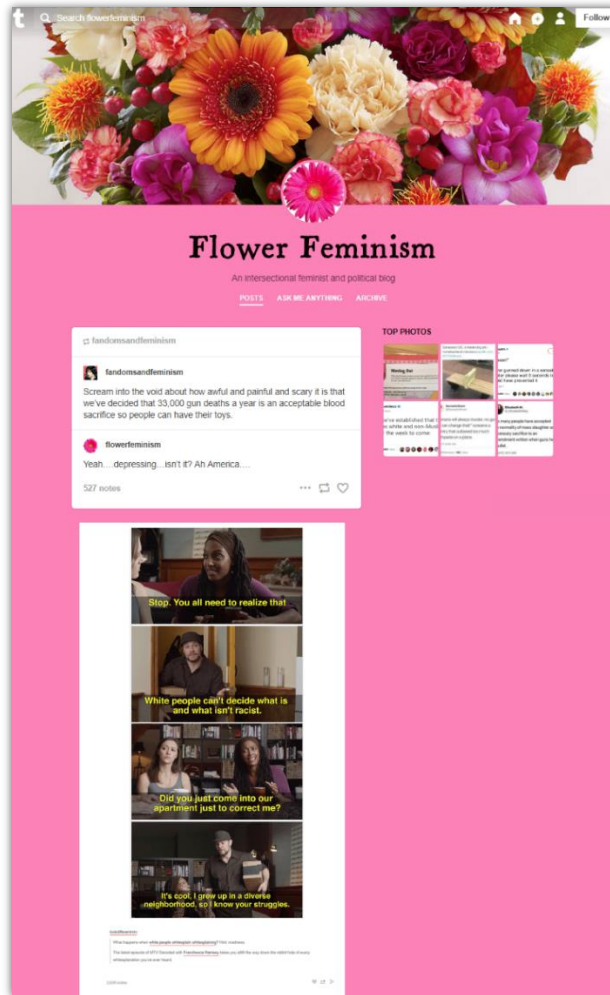


Figure 9: Sample Tumblr blog

Users become involved in a type of collective community by following and being followed by other Tumblr members with similar interests. The Tumblr dashboard is users' homepage where posts from all the blogs they follow appear, where they can scroll through and interact with the content of members they follow. The interactional affordances on Tumblr share some similarities with those of Twitter. Labeled in Figure 10, Tumblr users can (a) share a post on other sites, email, or copy or embed the link to distribute it elsewhere; (b) comment on it; (c) repost it on their own profile, or (d) "like" the post. As users blog and reblog posts, popular content gains more visibility in the Tumblr community.



Figure 10: Tumblr's interational affordances

Figure 10 shows an additional feature of Tumblr posts, that of including tags, which appear below the post, such as “#this aged me 84 years” in the example above. Unlike Twitter whose hashtags must not contain spaces, on Tumblr, such a tag is treated as a unified tag; however, clicking on such a tag brings up results of posts that have also tagged any of the words, *this*, *aged*, *me*, *84*, and *years*. This exemplifies the idea of tags functioning more as commentary on a post than for the purpose of interlinking with other identical tags (Bourlai, 2018).

Replies to posts, done by clicking on the speech bubble, are a way to respond to a post – which Tumblr encourages in its guidelines that users “say something nice.” Replies are “more specific than a like, less of a commitment than a reblog, and more public than a message” (Tumblr, 2017). Users can reply to original posts and reblogs; the constraint on replies are that

they are limited to 475 characters. All replies, as well as likes and reblogs, on a post can be seen in the notes design, as displayed in Figure 11, which shows a post with 29 notes, of which 23 are likes, 4 are reblogs, and 2 are comments from other users:



Figure 11: Replies to Tumblr post

Domain demographics. With respect to user demographics, some noteworthy differences can be observed across Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr. The most striking variance is the likelihood of Reddit users to be men and young. Across Internet users in general, the age group with the most users is 18-29 (Pew Research, 2015); however on Reddit, the difference is significantly more acute than other SNS with 18-29 year olds making up 64% of all Reddit users (Barthel, Stocking, Holcomb, & Mitchell, 2016), in comparison to the 37% of Twitter users between 18 and 29, and 40% of Tumblr users between 16 and 24 (McGrath, 2016). In terms of

gender, 67% of Reddit users are men (Barthel et al., 2016), whereas on Twitter there is a slim majority of men over women (Aslam, 2017), and women on Tumblr slightly outnumber the men on Tumblr (Chang et al., 2016).

Statement of the Problem

So far in this chapter, I have introduced the online discourse phenomenon of the word *mansplain* and other *splain* wordplay that it inspired, and three key dimensions of *splain*-based discourses: (1) that individual disputes reveal broader social issues; (2) the subjectivity of opposing viewpoints regarding what kind of language is justified or unjustified; and (3) that these disputes make language an object, thus provoking linguistic reflexivity, which I discuss in the lens of Citizen Sociolinguistics (Rymes, 2014). I introduced the concept of *splain* words as uniquely playful and creative forms of the Internet phenomena of *call-out culture* and *digilantism*, and contextualized the pragmatics of *splain* discourse within the disembodied environment of online communication. I also introduced the parameters of sociability in Web 2.0 discourse where real-world identities – along with the stereotypes, inequalities, and power relations of identities – play a vital role in linguistic practices and performances in online spaces. I discussed the functions of metapragmatics in terms of a method of discourse management, identity work, and responses to social tensions and transformations. The shifts in how researchers define and view discourse in terms of *texts*, *contexts*, *interaction*, and *power relations* was also discussed, particularly in response to CMD scholars' call for rethinking how to approach the "Discourse 2.0" of new media (Herring & Androustopoulos, 2015). Finally, I have highlighted the significance of the diverse affordances of three SNS in terms of their functions and organization of user interaction. What consequently emerges, however, are some gaps in the understanding of how people utilize SNS affordances and metapragmatic resources to perform

identities, and to produce and reproduce various linguistic ideologies. The gaps include issues of online metapragmatic discourse, as well as how wordplay reveals multiple perceptions underlying users' interpretation and performance of pragmalinguistic conventions. I discuss these issues in more detail below.

Considering the creative possibilities of *splain* words, their growing prevalence in SNS discourse, and varying ways people use and discuss particular forms of condescending language, *splain* language is a prolific source of linguistic expression that can be investigated for understanding digital discourse practices, issues of social imbalances, and beliefs of what is socially valuable language use. Based on these points, I have identified several research gaps in need of investigation in regard to metapragmatics in digital discourse, and power differentials in social identities. First, 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. 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 not been investigated in any serious inquiry beyond my own. Finally, issues of diversity, difference, and social justice in social media have also been the focus of many studies across disciplines, yet very few have approached these issues within the framework of metapragmatics. As a result, not much is understood about (citizen sociolinguists') ideologies of language practices between social groups, nor across varying online platforms with differing technological affordances and demographics. And to my knowledge, no research investigates these topics as they emerge by way of neology. Having now identified these research gaps, in the remainder of this chapter, I discuss why research is needed, and what it will contribute.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore creative wordplay and metapragmatic strategies via the *splain* affix across three distinctive settings of digital discourse in respect to their various affordances and user characteristics. I have chosen to focus on *splain* to make up the core of the discourse under investigation based on: (1) *splain*'s ability to be re-appropriated and re-contextualized for seemingly any social group or conversation topic through lexical blending; (2) the potential to provoke those who encounter the words to reflect on their own and other's language use, on how that language intersects with the social categories that unite and divide us; and finally (3) for its tendency to ignite discussions on language regulation in general.

Specifically, the study will investigate the range of *splain* words occurring on the three SNS, as well as the function of the prefix with which the *splain* suffix is blended. A critical approach to the discourse in and around the post/tweet is necessary to establish a relationship between the linguistic elements and social implications, while engaging a strong sensitivity to its sociocultural context. From this analysis, I address issues of power relations that emerge (e.g., gender in *mansplain*, race in *whitesplain*) by taking into account the links between metapragmatic strategies and implications in the wider sociocultural context. I also discuss the differences of *splain* language across the three platforms and the implications of the similarities and/or differences. Within this analysis, I address differences in discourse using *splain* language, and metadiscourse about *splain* language.

Research Questions

In order to analyze metapragmatics and social identities in digital discourse within my data set, I ask the following research questions and sub-research questions:

1. What meanings are communicated in the uses of popular *splain* words from texts and co-texts on Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr?
 - a. How do the meanings and uses of the words differ depending on their metaⁿ level?
 - b. What semantic meanings are conveyed?
 - c. What pragmatic functions are employed?
 - d. What metapragmatic strategies emerge?
2. How do the meanings and uses of the *splain* words in RQ2 vary across Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr?

In RQ1, I question what (meta)pragmatic strategies are employed in the language using *splain* words, and how those strategies function to reveal social values of how people should or should not talk to each other. For instance, users may employ *splain* words to manage others' language, to manage their own language, or to reject the term's legitimacy. I explore the words' functions and their connections to wider social values and what social actions are being done through the use of this word.

RQ2 investigates differences in *splain* language across the three SNS. As the user demographics, the technological affordances and limitations, and the ways in which people connect and interact differ across the sites, I question the differences of various types of *splain* words that occur, and how people use the words and discuss them. By comparing and contrasting what users in each site do with the words, I analyze how ideologies towards different social groups and sociopragmatic norms might or might not differ depending on the online realm in which they occur.

Overall, the study intends to address the three gaps highlighted in the previous section through qualitative analysis. I approach the gaps with a combination of discourse analytic paradigms: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which underscores the revealing of hegemony

and power relations in discourse (Fairclough, 1992), and Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis, an approach to discourse that bears in mind the influence of computer-mediated environments on language practices (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). These approaches are discussed more fully in Chapter Three (p. 78). In addition to a critical computer-mediated analytic approach to the discourse, this project is especially informed by the “Social Science 2.0” methodology of Citizen Sociolinguistics (Rymes, 2014). Guided by these frameworks, I explore instances of *splain* words and the discourse surrounding them on the three platforms, Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit.

Significance of Study

The significance of the study begins with the demonstration that individual words can evoke various observations regarding language and differences between social groups from everyday language users. Linguistic pragmatics intersects with particular social groups when wordplay embeds the groups with some form of *explain*, therefore illuminating ideologies that connect and shape us, as well as wider implications of regulating one another’s linguistic behavior. Thus, widespread social values become observable in diverse discourses sharing one commonality: words sharing the *splain* affix provoke many who encounter them to reflect critically on how we speak to each other and examine why. *Splain* language prompts users to reflexively discuss the appropriateness of their own and others’ language and 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.

This investigation of *splain* language sheds light on ways SNS discourses illuminate issues in the social landscape and amongst the categories that unite and divide people. Regardless of conflicting viewpoints, such discussions might not have occurred without the provocation of *mansplain* and its imitations. The discourse prompted by *splain* consequently gives public value to various issues, and social meaning to the ideas expressed through the term.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a synthesis of research on metapragmatics, linguistic creativity, and the aspects of social involvement in communication mediated by Web 2.0 technologies.

Metapragmatics

In order to fully understand how users perform metapragmatic acts with *splain* language in social media discourse, it is vital to achieve a deeper understanding of metapragmatics as an area of study and how it is related to metalanguage and pragmatics more generally. The synthesis below provides details of the various definitions, perspectives, and developments of metapragmatics. A preface of what metapragmatics entails is provided first before clarifying overlaps and opposing viewpoints in the literature, which occur primarily with related constructs such as *metalanguage*, *language reflexivity*, *metacommunication*, and *metadiscourse*. Then I focus back on metapragmatics to more thoroughly outline the expansion of how it is understood in linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, and semiotic studies. Following metapragmatics, the background of *splain* language and linguistic creativity in digital discourse are examined. The chapter concludes with a review of research involving language, identity, and justice in online social networks.

Key definitions of metapragmatics. Fundamentally, metapragmatic language is when “talk about talk” performs as a commentary on communicative norms. It occurs when speech describes a discussion about what language is doing in a certain context, and understanding metapragmatics is central to understanding how we “connect various features of linguistic behavior to a larger moral order” (Cameron, 2004, p. 314). Over the past four decades, since

anthropological linguist Michael Silverstein (1976) proposed the theory of metapragmatics, the term has been explained by numerous scholars, at times with overlapping or conflicting ideas within. These will be clarified following an overarching explanation of the term.

The pragmatic aspect of language is, as Lucy (1993) explains, “All the meaningfulness of signs connected with ongoing usage in contexts of communication” (p. 17). Pragmatics studies how context is linked to meaning, what messages are implied beyond the semantic level of language as they depend not only on syntax and lexical knowledge, but also on pre-existing knowledge, speaker intention, speaker-listener relationship, and the sociocultural context and specific communicative repertoire (e.g., language, dialect, register).

Therefore, *meta*-pragmatics is language about the *meaning* of an utterance, where “meaning” refers not to lexico-semantic meaning, but the pragmatic level: the implied message and/or its social value. For example, the first sentence of this paragraph is metasemantic, as I point out a specific word (“meaning”) and talk about what it signifies. In contrast, “I didn’t mean to insult you” serves both as an utterance’s content and message, where both refer to the appropriateness of another utterance, spoken at another time. Speakers constantly use metapragmatic signaling to interpret what is happening in discourse, and to ensure that intended meanings are communicated. The reason is not only for successful communication of an utterance, but because misunderstandings of intent can be face-threatening, potentially leading to a misinterpretation of the selves we wish to present to others. That is, without clarification that, for instance, a statement did not intend to insult, a speaker may risk being (mis)identified as someone who is rude, aloof, or insensitive to others.

The scope of metapragmatics can be somewhat hazy, and a number of scholars have attempted to organize the various types and functions. One such categorization is the “three

senses” of metapragmatics established by Caffi (1994, p. 2461). The first is a metatheoretical sense, asking what pragmatics is about, for example, the explanation of what Pragmatics is to students of Linguistics. The second highlights and explains the conditions that allow speakers’ exchange to be effective, such as, “Does that make sense?” or “Hope this clarifies what I meant.” The third concerns the specific “management of discourse” (p. 2464); it is the investigation of speakers’ know-how in reflecting judgments of appropriateness in their own and others’ communication. For instance, “No offense but...” is an expression that reveals the speaker is monitoring her language and is aware that what follows might or will cause offense. It is a negotiation between particular features of the content and discursive practices maintained by larger-scale social circumstances. This utterance functions as an identity performance in relation to its perceived appropriateness, characterizing the speaker in a particular way, e.g., as empathetic towards the feelings of others.

Tanskanen (2007) adds to Caffi’s third sense, pointing out that metapragmatic acts of discourse management can be self-referential or other-referential. Whereas “No offense but...” monitors one’s own language, speakers do the same to others’ language, such as a parent speaking to a child, “You should say ‘please’,” or this comment on an online article to other prospective commenters: “Please don’t yell at me or call me stupid, but...” Additionally, metapragmatic utterances can simultaneously manage one’s own and other’s language: while “No offense but...” is self-referential, pointing to the language of the speaker, it could also have a role in managing responses from others. It could be used to serve as a type of *stake inoculation*, a discursive strategy that minimizes “the risk of being held accountable for one’s actions” (Hall, Gough, & Seymore-Smith, 2013, p. 231), attempting to shield the speaker of accusations of being offensive or speaking too frankly.

As we can see, what metapragmatic speech does is it reflexively assesses the circumstances and consequences of speech and linguistic forms (Lucy, 1993; Silverstein, 1979). It is important to study because such language is a tool that allows people to performatively construct identities; more specifically, it allows for an indexical positioning of their identity as members of a certain social groups. At the micro level, metapragmatic performances are reflections on one's own or others' talk; however, at the macro level, this speech is done in response to a larger context of widespread cultural ideologies – ideologies about power, about the social landscape, and about how we are connected and divided (Silverstein, 2003; Verschueren, 1995).

This reflexive capability of language has been the subject of active study from various disciplines for several decades (Hübler & Bublitz, 2007), and there exists a wealth of research on similar concepts such as *metalanguage* (Jakobson, 1960), *reflexive language* (Lucy, 1993), *metadiscourse* (Hyland, 2005), *metacommunication* (Bateson, 1972), alongside *metapragmatics* (Silverstein, 1976). Within these conceptualizations are some overlaps where different terminologies are mostly referring to similar linguistic phenomena. It is worthwhile to differentiate between what I call *meta-X* labels and determine which are relevant to understanding metapragmatics.

Mapping meta-X labels. The term *metadiscourse*, to begin with, refers to how individuals rely on metalinguistic strategies to clarify what they mean. Namely, metadiscourse attends to the lexico-syntactic level of writing and rhetorical forms of language in text such as “on the other hand,” used to organize a text, or “to my surprise” which establishes the writer’s position towards the reader or content. On the surface, metadiscourse can appear synonymous to metalanguage and metapragmatics in that all three of these *meta-X* terms facilitate an

understanding of the relationship between language and its context and how individuals use language to position themselves and interpret linguistic interactions. However, in research and the application of the term, the study of metadiscourse functions predominantly in the service of text analysis and language teaching: metadiscourse research “tends to focus on written rather than spoken texts,” specifically on “specialized varieties” of written language and contributing “cohesive features to writer-reader understandings (Hyland, 2017, p. 17). Hyland’s (2005) framework of metadiscourse, building upon structural linguist Zelig Harris’ (1959) introduction of the concept, is used most widely in writing pedagogy and in corpus-based and quantitative studies, which ultimately treat “discourse” in the structuralist view as a unit of language that is ‘above the sentence.’ That is, metadiscourse focuses less on general conversational operations and dimensions of pragmatic language ideologies (Hyland, 2017, p. 17). It should be noted that the specific area of study of metadiscourse should not be confused with expressions like “metalinguistic discourse” (Jones, 2013, p. 76) or “metadiscursive language” (Thurlow, 2006, p. 108) where authors describe metalanguage from a discourse-analytic perspective. In essence, these terminologies have a broader scope than metadiscourse in terms of implicit linguistic signaling and analysis of pragmatic concepts in language.

Next, more closely related to metapragmatics is *metacommunication*, which, like metapragmatics and metadiscourse, stemmed from the study of metalanguage in general. Metacommunication, popularized by anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972), refers to cues that give necessary information for communication to be interpreted. Bateson makes a distinction between messages that are metalinguistic, or about language, and messages that are metacommunicative, which connect the interaction between speaker and listener to the communicative frame. In relation to metapragmatics, Bateson’s view is a much broader one, as it

also considers the communicative functions of nonverbal features such as gestures and posture (Chino, Fukui & Suzuki, 2000) or clothing and fashion (Skeehan, 2015). Researchers influenced by Bateson's notion of metacommunication have applied the construct to investigating a wide range of communication, to list only a few: communication between children (Halliday-Scher, Uberg, & Kaplan-Estrin, 1995), between families (Gottman, 1987), in human resource departments (Tosey & Mathison, 2008). Some even use Bateson's framework for communication of nonhuman organisms (Mitchell, 1991), between machines (Dybkjaer, Bernsen, & Dybkjaer, 1998), and between animals (Bekoff, 1972). While metacommunication and metalanguage are in many ways synonymous and metapragmatics is undoubtedly within the umbrella of metacommunication, what metacommunication encompasses is far broader than metapragmatics and metalanguage.

What metapragmatics *does* stem from and intersect with, however, is Lucy's (1993) concept of *reflexive language*. Reflexivity - the *meta* element – in reflexive language refers to the function of language that communicates about the action of using language. Any language that reflects upon itself is indeed metalanguage; thus, following the view that reflexive language embraces all metalinguistic means and strategies to reference and evaluate language, it can be said that the processes and purposes of metapragmatics are a sub-category of reflexive language. Fundamentally, Lucy's language reflexivity is sometimes used synonymously with "metalanguage" in general, as metalanguage *is* reflexive language.

In sum, the notions of *metalanguage*, *metadiscourse*, *metacommunication*, *reflexive language*, and *metapragmatics* are interconnected and as Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism describes, all meanings are constantly interacting and influencing each other. As more and more scholars across various fields use and "re-entextualize" these "polycontextual" terms (Urban,

1996, p. 21), their meanings can shift, merge, and spread, like all other words in language, as they are living things that are shaped through their active participation in social dialogue. Figure 12 is a simplification of how I have come to understand the various labels discussed in this section.

The image shows, as discussed, metacommunication as the outermost circle, as it has come to incorporate not only metalanguage, but communicative methods apart from the linguistic and even paralinguistic level; it comprises communication beyond human language, such as that of animals, cellular-level biology, and machines. Circle 2 is metalanguage, which involves all linguistic features of human communication such as the language(s) dialect(s), and/or accent(s) in question, and therefore multilingualism, and various “communicative repertoires” (Rymes & Leone, 2014). Additionally, it approaches speech in terms of phonetics, lexical choices, prosodic features such as speech rate and intonation, and paralinguistic aspects such as gestures and equivalent text-based representations like emoticons and creative orthography. Metalanguage, then, while not quite as all-encompassing as metacommunication, deals with all layers and aspects of human communication, including pragmatics.

Metadiscourse (Circle 3) is used to refer to a specific area of written language and is a specialized area of study within metalanguage. The metadiscourse circle overlaps partially with metapragmatics, given that some aspects of metapragmatics involve conditions of linguistic choices that, like items scrutinized in metadiscourse studies, seek to accomplish effectively interpreted messages. For example, in the utterance “The dress is obviously white and gold,” the adverb *obviously* establishes a relationship between the writer and what is being discussed with an emphasis on the degree of access to the information surrounding the adverb.

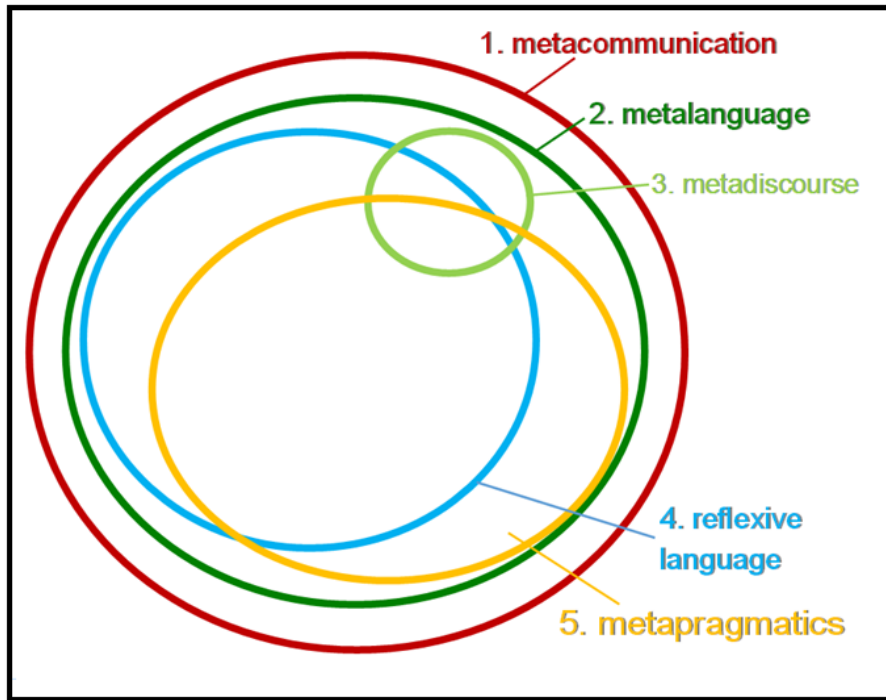


Figure 12: Graphic representation of meta-X overlaps

Where the overlaps and connections become thorny is between metapragmatics and reflexive language/metalanguage. As described above, reflexive language and metalanguage are essentially synonymous, even though scholars of reflexive language tend to concentrate more heavily on reported speech functions in metalanguage (Hübler & Bublitz, 2007). Whether reflexive language and metapragmatics, however, are always the same is not so clear. The two terms are used synonymously by Verschueren (2000), with both referring to the study of meta-level speech “at which verbal communication is self-referential to various degrees” (p. 367). Similarly, Silverstein (1993) notes that “metalinguistic activity... is fundamentally metapragmatic, that is, most reflexive activity deals with the appropriate *use* of language” (p. 43). He continues to explain that the part of metalanguage dealing with semantics (e.g., “the word ‘puppy’ means young dog”) is a not separate from pragmatics, but rather a subset of it. As Mertz and Yovel (2009) explain, “all speech depends upon this pragmatic function of language” (p. 253).

Nonetheless, in the usage of terminology and choosing a framework, there is a differentiation in the literature between metalanguage (or reflexive language) and what is specifically metapragmatic. Metapragmatics, in application, typically centers more specifically on the sociocultural knowledge of appropriateness and real-world consequences of the choices made in speech, even if that includes metalinguistic features at the semantic, syntactic, or phonological level.

Developing the scope of metapragmatics. Now that some definitions and overlaps with similar terms have been clarified, it is worth examining metapragmatics as its own term and framework of study. Metapragmatics began as a distinct topic when linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein (1976) proposed a theory of metasemiotic practice. Metapragmatics in the Silversteinian tradition is largely credited as the earliest, most wide-ranging, and most influential usage of the term (Verschueren, 1995). Going back a bit further, Silverstein's (1976, 1979, 1993) work on metapragmatics, like that of Bateson, Lucy, and Hyland, was largely inspired by theoretical linguist Roman Jakobson (1960) to whom metalanguage as a topic of study is attributed. Jakobson classified language into two fundamental phenomena of communication: the message (M), the content being communicated, and the code (C), the language itself. (M) and (C) can both refer to each other or to oneself (e.g., M/M is a message referring to message and can be found in reported speech; M/C occurs when a word is mentioned rather than used; C/C are proper names which cannot be defined without circular reference to the code itself; C/M is discussed below).

Jakobson's view of metalanguage was limited, however, in that he was not interested in metalanguage as an object of focus beyond *what* is being said, thus disregarding how speakers do things such as framing their own or others' language as, for instance, true or false, precise or

vague, and so on (Hübler & Bublitz, 2007, p. 3). Silverstein (1976) concentrated on Jakobson's notions of metalanguage, specifically when the code makes reference to a message (C/M), and further developed the notion of *indexicality*. Indexicality is tightly interwoven with metapragmatics, as language practices – and complex histories of social groups – are at the essence of both concepts (Blommaert, 2010). Metapragmatic function “serves to regiment indexicals into interpretable events of such-and-such type” (Silverstein, 1993, p. 37), thus metapragmatic awareness enables speakers to draw upon social indexes based upon language. To put it simply, the ways speakers use language can ascribe certain social roles upon them, pointing them out as certain types of people or members of certain groups. Common examples of how linguistic forms mark speakers' belonging into certain social groups deal with phonological, lexical, and semantic forms that are semiotically associated with location, class, age, or profession. For instance, speakers index authentic localness through the /aw/-monophthongization in Pittsburgh (pronouncing *house* like [ha:s]) (Johnstone & Keisling, 2008), using *youze* for the plural *you* in Philadelphia, or using “insider” names of Brooklyn neighborhoods (Sierra & Botti, 2014). Indexicals such as these are what Silverstein (2003) refers to as “*n*th-order” indexicals, which includes “first-order” and “second-order” indexicals. Features of a Pittsburgh dialect are an example of a “first-order” indexical as it is a feature an outsider could recognize, associating the speaker as someone from Pittsburgh. When speakers become metalinguistically aware of 1st orders and begin using them to create a context for that style, “second-order” indexicality has occurred. That is, the 2nd order refers to speakers knowingly employing 1st-order indexical variations to do identity work, such as avoiding features associated with region to sound more cosmopolitan or using speech styles linked to a certain discourse community to show membership in that group.

In considering *splain* words and/or discussing the language use that *splain* words point to, higher orders of indexicalities are needed; *splain* language goes beyond the “*n*th-order” indexicals. Silverstein identified higher levels of indexicalities, calling them the “*n*+1th-order.” Higher-order indexicalities point to particularities of lifestyle “emblemization” (p. 222), where language varieties mark certain personal qualities that become “iconizations” (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p. 37) of one’s morals of social etiquette, or even political views. Having access to certain technical vocabularies, such as the lingo of wine tastings to use Silverstein’s (2003) example, can indexically entail elements of a prestigious social group. As a result of using the “iconic” language of wine, speakers can claim the social status shared by those who critique wine. For *splain* language, indexical orders could be understood in how uses of certain *splain* words may index some demographic information, as well as aspects of users’ 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 woman). But higher orders of indexicality might also link her to modern-day feminism and the diverse sociopolitical beliefs that exist about feminists.

Another development in the delineation of metapragmatic forms is Silverstein’s identification of three dimensions in which metapragmatic language can be situated. While all three are useful to this project’s study of *splain* language, the third is the most relevant. The first, *object of meta-semiosis*, deals with the fusion of (meta)semantics and (meta)pragmatics. Silverstein differentiated the two from one another, as well as from the overall notion of meta-semiotics; however, they often overlap. Talking about an individual *splain* word is simultaneously metasemantic and metapragmatic as both the semantic value and the pragmatic implication of the word are inseparable in its meaning. Second, *denotational explicitness*

categorizes explicitness/implicitness of metapragmatic forms, such as explicit performative verbs (e.g., “promise”), as opposed to Gumperz’s (1982) implicit notion of “contextualization cues,” the often-prosodic linguistic means that speakers use to signal how utterances should be interpreted. Exploring *splain* language uncovers metapragmatic forms across the spectrum of explicit and implicit meaning-making.

The third dimension is *mutual calibration*, which refers to an adjustment of linguistic forms and social meaning. How language makes meaning in a particular social context depends on factors such as the social distance, power differential, and imposition of the message (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Pragmatics allows for the understanding that when there is a mismatch between the sociopragmatic conventions of speakers (i.e., what is appropriate in a particular context) or speakers’ pragmalinguistic choices (i.e., how the utterance is spoken, such as directly or indirectly), sociolinguistic and metapragmatic failures can occur, leaving speakers with communicative problems and misinterpretations of each other’s intentions, and therefore possible inaccuracies in indexing identities. The concept of mutual calibration, which requires metapragmatic awareness, allows speaker-listeners to sort through these sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic challenges.

Linguist Barbara Johnstone (2011) also discusses the notion of *mutual calibration* as an awareness - conscious or unconscious - that speakers must constantly have to make meaning from the language around them and ensure their language is contextually appropriate. In other words, humans are innately able to pay attention to language and make certain generalizations from its form. We understand the link between linguistic forms and social meaning, indexing them in a way that allows us to orient ourselves with other speakers and share common conjectures about others’ identities. In metapragmatics, as these indexes become stable and

salient enough, people can begin to make commentary on them, such as appropriate usage for a particular audience, genre, or situation.

Independent of Silverstein's contributions to metapragmatics is Kiefer and Verschueren's (1988) and Verschueren's (1985, 1989) linguistic study of metapragmatic terms and action verbs, a more restricted study that was "an attempt to come to grips with the varying ways in which linguistic behavior is conceptualized by those engaged in it" (p. 370), which Verschueren explains could be regarded as "folk-metapragmatics." In other words, all humans engage in metapragmatics, with the layperson performing metapragmatic commentary equally as often as the trained linguist.

Silverstein (1981) pointed out that speaker's awareness of pragmatic occurrences does not necessarily align with the metapragmatic descriptions of the linguist. Silverstein warned against the confusing speakers' awareness and the linguist's descriptions, and Verschueren (1995) stated that folk-metapragmatics should "be approached with due caution" (p. 370). From the emergence of metapragmatics in the late 70s until very recently, the notion of folk-metapragmatics has been discussed as something linguists should be aware of. However, the objective of knowing about these folk ideologies was not for the sake of understanding how the everyday person regards language, but rather only to prevent furthering any false ideologies that exist among linguistic scholarship. That is, understandings of language among non-linguists, false or not, have not been as much of an area of study in and of itself in fields of linguistic study.

In response to a sort of "Us versus Them" mentality among linguistic researchers towards the non-expert producers of everyday speakers' metalinguistic commentary, Rymes and Leone (2014) propose a new sociolinguistic methodology that they call "citizen sociolinguistics." The

approach takes from “citizen science”, a methodology that has existed for centuries in which data collected and/or analyzed by nonexperts (e.g., the migratory patterns of birds) are accumulated to contribute to humanity’s overall knowledge of a topic. This approach removes the idea that only formally trained linguists’ evaluations of talk or language use are accurate or worthwhile observations, or that linguists’ judgments are superior in anyway with reference to widespread societal beliefs.

Looking at how citizens participate in discussions on language reveals what carries social value and is especially relevant when considering language use in digital environments, namely in Web 2.0 where anyone can create, share, and comment on the available information. Rymes and Leone (2014) say that information is no longer “rarified or restricted to halls of academe... and the sharedness is precisely what makes information valuable” (p. 32). While Rymes and Leone’s notion of citizen sociolinguistics is more in line with what could be called “folk metalanguage” (such as which languages, dialects, or varieties are used), rather than specifically “folk metapragmatics,” it can also be usefully applied to the narrower notion of metapragmatics. By extension, then, those who participate in folk metapragmatics are creating “citizen pragmatics” through discussion of what linguistic forms are appropriate in particular contexts.

Cameron (2004) has also proposed a critical analysis of people’s judgements of communicative norms and skills and points out a rise in people’s “metacommunicative competence” in media discourse. She warns, “We need to be aware that our own expert metalanguage is as ideological as folk metalanguage” (p. 317), reiterating other linguists’ (e.g., Rymes & Leone, 2014; Silverstein, 2000) critiques of more traditional sociolinguistic methodologies. What is shown in metapragmatic research is that metapragmatic talk is inherently citizen sociolinguistics; that is, research on metapragmatic language has shown to what extent

non-linguists are aware of what formally trained linguists have long been discussing. To use an example from Wikström's (2016): in the tweet, "LOL IF U TALKIN BOUT ME I KNOW HOW TO SPELL I JUST TWEET LIKE I TALK", this user explains that his deviation from standard spelling is not an inability to spell but rather that it carries purposeful meaning, and thus "expresses a folk-linguistic equivalent to a scholarly distinction between an orthographical norm... and a notion of functional and socially meaningful respelling" (p. 5).

One final key point of metapragmatics worthy of mention is the observable similarity across all discussions of metapragmatics in the literature on the pervasiveness and cruciality of metalanguage. In fact, according to research in corpus linguistics (e.g., Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002; Stubbe, 2001), the most common lexical verb in English is "say". Communication verbs, such as "say", "explain", "talk", "write," "claim", are indeed metalinguistic by default as they refer to the linguistic action they are at once performing. When the content of the referred-to communication pertains to the social and cultural knowledge of language, it is therefore metapragmatic. The fact that the most frequent lexical verb in the language is a metalinguistic one provides another indication of the omnipresence of metalanguage.

Scholars agree the ubiquity is not merely a social fact that reflexivity characterizes linguistic utterances - that is, that metalinguistic utterances *can* exist in language - but it is also the case that the reflexive nature of linguistic structure, and the language user's awareness of what is involved in the event of using certain forms, is precisely what makes human language exist in the first place. Verschueren (1995) states that "this phenomenon of reflexive awareness 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 at all possible" (p. 367).

The fact that language *must* be reflexive can be seen in the ubiquity of metapragmatics in all textual and verbal language, the depth of scholarship on the topic, its presence across many fields of study such as anthropology and philosophy, as well as all the branches and sub-branches of the topic that scholars have worked to categorize and formulate. While I have aimed to provide an integrated overview of metapragmatics and its related *meta-X* terms in this section, I have in fact only scratched the surface. The next two sections aim to build upon this section with specific research studies related to metapragmatics in discourse and computer-mediated communication.

Synthesis of metapragmatic research in discourse studies and CMC. As mentioned above, the earliest literature on metapragmatics was mostly theoretical as scholars like Silverstein (1979), Verschueren (1985), and Caffi (1995) attempted to categorize the numerous ways that metapragmatics occurred in language, creating categories, labeling various aspects in order to decode utterances at a very micro level. Soon other scholars began to add to the literature with less micro-level categories to metapragmatics. For instance, Hübler and Bublitz (2007) distinguished metapragmatics as *topic vs. performance*, and *occasional vs. regular*. Eventually, the *what* of the concept became salient enough that other scholars were able to begin applying it to real-world language use to study the *how* and the *why* (Bublitz & Hübler, 2007).

Questions regarding how these linguistic phenomena exist and function in other languages beyond English have provided fertile ground for metapragmatic exploration. Some sub-topics include cross-cultural comparisons of metapragmatic functions (e.g., Chen, 1997; Blum-Kulka, 1992) and metapragmatic judgments on non-native speakers' language (Ruhil, 1998). Analyses of specific discourse soon emerged, such as the social implications of specific metapragmatic functions in other languages, especially speech acts, such as quotative markers in

Japanese (Suzuki, 2007), apologetic metapragmatic comments in Japanese (Pizziconi, 2007) and metapragmatic criticism in Thai (Hongladarom, 2007).

Other trends in metapragmatic research aimed to investigate its role in educational talk such as metapragmatic discourse in lecture halls (Smith & Liang, 2007), the acquisition of metapragmatic abilities in children (e.g., Astington, 1990; Stude, 2007), and metapragmatic formulations in university discourse (Vásquez, 2010). Similarly, institutional talk has been a common application of metapragmatic theory, as researchers analyzed how metapragmatics differs across various institutional settings (Ciliberti & Anderson, 2007), in the courtroom (e.g., Caranza, 2008; Janney, 2007; Matoesian, 2000), and in therapy sessions (Muntigl, 2007).

Additionally, research on specific discourse markers has been a point of interest in a number of studies. Craig and Sanusi (2000) explore “saying” expressions as pragmatic devices through which speakers make claims of and achieve continuity in their argumentative stance (“I’m just saying...”), acknowledge viewpoints of their position (“I was gonna say...”), deflect or acknowledge counterclaims (“I’m not saying...”), and to save face in disagreements (“I just don’t think...”). Similarly, Overstreet and Yule (2002) investigate two metapragmatic functions of “and everything/and all that.” The first formula, “[X] and everything, but [Y],” has a clarifying role permitting speakers to signal an evaluation, in which the message is essentially *I acknowledge X to be the case and basis of certain expectations, but I present Y as a justification for thinking the contrary*. For example: “I mean, I was a wild kid, I’d cut school and all that, but it really had to do with my wanting always to push the envelope” (p. 786). The second “and everything/and all that” formula shows the speaker assumes intersubjective understanding with their interlocutor. In this sample, “[At Mardi Gras,] there were king cakes, beads, and

everything!” the speaker shows an expectation that other aspects of Mardi Gras are instantiated by a set of elements of which king cake and beads are members (p. 787).

Contrary to the more micro-level metapragmatic analyses of discourse mentioned so far, other researchers have used metapragmatics to observe macro-level social ideologies. For instance, metapragmatic commentary can expose how people respond to sociopolitical or economic tensions to indexically positioning themselves as “good,” democratic citizens, such as when speakers on opposite sides of a debate use the same tautologies and metapragmatic contentions against each other, e.g., pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli activists both using “support the oppressed” in awareness posters (Kramer, 2013). Metapragmatics can reveal transitions of meanings during times of radical social change, and how semiotic transformations characterize and/or enable political change (e.g., Soares da Silva, 2008; Taddei, 2005).

One longitudinal study worthy of note is Peterson’s (2015) study on Indian citizens’ metapragmatic discussions about news as a performance through which people construct identities as citizens in the nation-state. He illustrates a shift in perceptions of essentially boring-but-important news of the early 90s to news-as-a-commodity fifteen years later. Reminiscent of Rymes and Leone’s (2014) “citizen sociolinguists,” Peterson describes a new trend of “citizen journalism” referring to footage captured by non-journalists’ that is frequently supplied to news networks, and the content therein becomes the source of news stories and subsequent commentaries. A consequential result not only of citizen journalism, but also the consumerism shift of the news, is the production of “infotainment” or “feel-good” stories of everyday people, which are mixed in with the traditional responsibilities of civic journalism. Peterson (2015)

shows through citizens' metapragmatic observations⁶ of news as a commodity that the public repositions news media as a "vehicle through which citizens may be *empowered* rather than as an institution that must protect them" (p. 682, emphasis added).

What Peterson (2015) ultimately demonstrates is that regardless of the shift in how people perceive the news, that news still matters to them. News media is a form of cultural meaning-making, and "a locus of interpretive practices" (p. 674). Furthermore, Peterson's underscoring of society's shift in valuation of information and knowledge is a piece of the pattern in the fractal-like representation of social evolution. Like the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, analogous shifts are being seen in other areas of human life. In order to keep up with the type of connectivity, internationalism, and participatory culture of Web 2.0, Rymes and Leone (2014) proposes a corresponding notion of "Social Science 2.0" which aids researchers "to account for and partake in the social demands and affordances of massive mobility and connectivity in today's world" (p. 27). Linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists like Silverstein, Peterson, Rymes and Leone, and Blommaert are pioneering fields of language studies into new directions that allow researchers to keep up with the seismic shifts of society.

Metapragmatics in computer-mediated communication. Until quite recently, little research has considered metapragmatics in digital discourse. However, parallel to the off-line metapragmatic studies mentioned above, some of the earlier research takes a more quantifiable or methodical concentration on types and functions of metapragmatics, while others use metapragmatics as a framework to inductively investigate how language constructs social reality. An example of the former is Tanskanen (2007) who classifies the types and functions of

⁶ For example, one participant said, "How can we worry about what might happen if we air a story? If we are always worrying about what might happen, how can we ever air any story? . . . Eighty thousand people turned out at the Gateway of India after the Bombay attacks because we brought those pictures into their bedrooms" (Peterson, 2015, p. 681).

metapragmatic utterances in group emails, and finds collaborative purposes in metapragmatics, for example, “I am sorry. I could do a better job explaining myself” (p. 94) was coded as retrospective, self-initiated, and intratextual with a control/planning function. That is, it alludes to language uttered in the past, by the writer themselves, and in a different text (email), as opposed to prospective, other-initiated, and intertextual. Plus, it functions to control the direction of the discourse, as opposed to judging appropriateness, or feedback on the ongoing interaction. She found that the majority metapragmatic utterances in emails were self-initiated and intratextual functioning as judgements of appropriateness. The study discusses how various types/functions all allow users to construct messages in a manner that allows for successful communication.

Addressing a particular structure of reported speech, Jones and Schieffelin’s (2009b) studied *be+like* as a quotative marker in instant messaging, such as “and she was like, why are we having this conversation in public?” These quotatives demonstrate that unlike other communicative verbs’ capacity to introduce direct or indirect reported speech, the *be+like* formula allows for a unique performance. This structure has a widespread folk-understanding of being ungrammatical and indexing American youth, and for some, it is evidence of linguistic decay (despite scientific inquiry demonstrating otherwise, D’Arcy, 2007). Notwithstanding, it enables a foregrounding of represented speech, allowing the speaker to dramatize the reported speech to add their own layer of meaning without having to directly comment on it. In other words, it not only implies that *what was actually said* and *what I’m reporting was said* may not necessarily be congruent, the speaker can also animate the speech to communicate their stance towards it. Thus, *be+like* allows for the lessened “epistemic commitment” (p. 98) of indirect reported speech to occur in direct reported speech.

Studies like Tanskanen (2007) are restricted in that the language users producing the utterances in question seem to only have a backstage role in the analysis and their intentions are conformed to convenient categories. As Mertz and Yovel (2009) state, “to presume homogeneity and presupposed metalinguistic consensus regarding the code seems an over-simplistic way to conceptualize communication” (p. 252). But the insights provided nonetheless helped lay some groundwork to understand the various functions of metapragmatics in CMC, and these studies show how metapragmatics achieves conversational cooperation and intended interpretation. Such dialogic coherence, much like “contextualization cues” (Gumperz, 1982), illuminate the importance of speakers’ ability to make inferences about discourse structure in order to communicate at all; and speakers’ intentions communicated through metapragmatics contribute to the seminal concepts of face work (Goffman, 1967) and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

What needed to follow was research beyond strategies to be coded, and politeness as the sole intention of language users. Scholars like Silverstein (2003) and van Dijk (2011) have called for linguistic pragmatic studies to take into account the unequal division of the *right* to disrupt or intervene with meta-actions. Metapragmatic expression *in theory*, is reciprocal and egalitarian with each participant able to act metapragmatically at any time. However, considering pragmatics deals with standards of appropriateness and social status, in reality, the question of power is essential when considering metapragmatics - which speakers are (and which are not) able to frame, structure, and prescribe the ‘code’ of linguistic interaction.

Building on this literature, many CMC studies have examined speakers’ intended interpretation through metapragmatics as intricate linguistic acts of complex social identities performing social action. Metapragmatic activities in social media allow for the study of

hegemonic discourses, how privileges of language use come into force, and how speakers reflect on stereotypes and social categories (Stæhr, 2015), as well as resistance to socio-politically imposed hegemonic practices (Lewis, 2014). Resistance to normativity through reflexive language cannot be mentioned without touching on the notion of *enregisterment* (Agha, 2005). Enregisterment occurs when users reflexively familiarize a way of talking as an object of conversational scrutiny. For example, Wikström (2016) looks at the enregisterment of “talk-like tweets,” that is, when Twitter users talk about how tweets textually reveal the voice, regional or social variation, grammatical accuracy, and their subsequent presumption of the users’ offline identities. As these Twitter users metalinguistically comment on particular linguistic forms, they negotiate linguistic norms and reveal the social values of those forms, but they are making “talk-like tweets” a topic of discussion, thus enregistering “talk-like tweets” as a set of linguistic features that can mark certain aspects of the Twitter user’s social identity. These studies of online metapragmatics frame the actions under investigation as ones of stance-taking and identity maintenance through the use of a variety of language.

Focusing on metapragmatic awareness, Coesemans and De Cock (2017) explore political tweets by European politicians, which they found not only serve to share updates or ideological messages, but also in the purpose of self-branding and self-promotion. The authors show that metapragmatic awareness allows politicians to make the most of certain linguistic choices, while adhering to Twitter’s 280-character limit, such as pronoun choice to illuminate local, national, or supranational identity, or increasing their campaign’s exposure through the use of hashtags. Hashtags are popular and worthwhile features for CMC research considering they make talk searchable (Zappavigna, 2015). Additionally, hashtags have numerous meaning-making capacities: to express an evaluation, to add peripheral information, or to demonstrate linguistic

creativity, just to name a few. In this way, they are inherently metapragmatic. As Rambukkana (2015) explains, “they are both text and metatext, information and tag, pragmatic and metapragmatic speech... hashtags point to themselves, to their own dual role in ongoing discourse... Hashtags push the boundaries of specific discourses. They expand the space of discourse along the lines that they simultaneously name and mark out” (p. 161).

Other CMC studies on metapragmatics take approaches to investigate what is the intended interpretation of an utterance. On the one hand, individuals’ metapragmatic awareness allows them to shape the intended interpretation of their *own* language (“self-referential metapragmatics”), showing how people relate to linguistic resources affiliated with particular styles in order to position themselves (e.g., Craig & Sanusi, 2000) or the “tellability” of their narratives (Georgakopoulou, 2004), in a variety of ways. On the other hand, commentary on *other’s* language, (or “other-referential metapragmatics”) can also be a metapragmatic tool to position oneself in relation to another, as well as within a wider social setting. Jones (2013) studies how members of an online community enforce linguistic norms, similar to what Cameron (1995) calls “verbal hygiene,” which sheds light on how attitudes towards particular linguistic values are linked to group membership accessibility. Conversely, Jones and Schieffelin (2009a) feature a response to linguistic purists’ mockery of text-message abbreviations, which shows an awareness of the stylistic marker of group membership, as well as the consciousness of metalinguistic play as a tool to disrupt prescriptive social norms.

Beyond regulation of other’s language, or commenting on how something *should* be said, other-referential metapragmatics can also strictly make commentary on the language and subsequent intended meaning, without overt assessment or evaluation of the accuracy or appropriateness therein. Such implicit metapragmatic is found in satire and humor, where

metapragmatic abilities are necessary. For example, comedian Amy Schumer's satirical sketch, in which women perform the speech act of giving and receiving compliments, is a metapragmatic performance highlighting - albeit through exaggeration - how women deflect compliments, e.g., in response to "Look at your cute little dress!" a woman replies, "Little? I'm like a size 100 now, anyway I paid like \$2 for it, it's probably made out of old Burger King crowns, I look like a whore locked out of her apartment" (Schumer, 2013). The sketch does not comment on language itself, but rather on a pattern in social discourse, implying the absurdity of the particular behavior. Taking into account that metapragmatics is related to pragmatic code and pragmatic ability, much of humor is thus an inherently critical discourse practice.

Turning to a study of humor as a metapragmatic social act, Kramer (2011) explores responses to online rape jokes, arguing "we must understand the ways that single instances of jokes and other forms of humor are tokens of broader genres imbued with cultural value" (p. 138). Looking at the metapragmatics of arguments for or against the funniness of rape jokes, Kramer's study demonstrates how the opposing viewpoints use the same beliefs about the function of language and humor, such as what constitutes a good sense of humor. The study shows how humor carries social and political value, as people telling, laughing at, or objecting to the jokes reveal the identity work of the speaker. Similar, then, to other research previously mentioned, there is an ideological framework of what types of people are associated with what types of language (in this case, rape jokes). In other words, people's particular social and political values are connected to and indexed by how they respond metapragmatically to particular styles of language.

This section has aimed to provide an overview of what previous researchers have done to explore and advance the study of metapragmatics. Overall, the objectives of this review so far

have been (1) to show the wide range of possibilities of metalinguistic and metapragmatic empirical study; (2) to contextualize the development of the field in a broader revolution parallel to the ongoing transitions of political, economic, and social sciences, i.e., from offline discourse to digital discourse, and broadening from surface-level analyses towards the consequences of metapragmatic action in the larger social context; and (3) ultimately to show how engagement in metapragmatics enables reactions to and reinforcement of widespread social changes, such as challenging prescriptivist norms, enregistering linguistic features and corresponding social values, and manipulating language play and humor to highlight social realities.

Linguistic Creativity and the Development of Splain

Taking into account the nucleus of the study – what I have been calling *splain* language – it is essential to dedicate some discussion to linguistic creativity in CMC, specifically creativity via neologisms, the creation of new words, and more specifically, the formation of neologisms by way of lexical blending. There exists a wealth of scholarship (e.g., Carter, 2004; Crystal, 2011; Maybin & Swann, 2007; Veale, 2012), as well as pop-culture journalism (e.g., Peters, n.d.; Zimmer, n.d.), and online open dictionaries (e.g., *UrbanDictionary*), dedicated to the pervasiveness and noteworthy methods of discursive creativity, especially lexical inventiveness. The digital age is undoubtedly producing an unparalleled abundance and caliber of linguistic creativity owing to the immediacy of new modes of CMC, the enormous possibilities of their technological tools, and the participatory and wide-reaching sharing capabilities of social media (Carter, 2016; Crystal, 2011; Davison, 2012; Frehner, 2008; and Vásquez, 2019).

The concept of creativity is a cross-disciplinary one, commonly theorized in terms of poetic function that challenges language rules (Jakobson, 1960), heteroglossic/dialogic plurality of voices in wordplay (Bakhtin, 1981), and performances of linguistic artistry (Bauman &

Briggs, 1990). The micro processes, such as in-the-moment acts of creativity, have the power to transform language and macro-social relations (Swann & Deumert, 2017). In the past two decades, the view of creativity in language has advanced from a nebulous and impractical one into a more pragmatic and rigorous theory that interprets creativity as a fundamental practice observable in any communicative event, and recognized as a cooperative and negotiated performance (Romano & Porto, 2016, p. 6). The theoretical concept of lexical creativity has been applied to a wide range of studies, thus uncovering multiple purposes for creativity in everyday speech, such as how offering new ways of interpreting a message, emphasizing content within a message, expressing speaker's stance, or manifesting speaker identity provide a window into the relationship between language, cognition, and society (Carter & McCarthy, 2004).

“Language is part of our daily routines and how it functions to help us get things done, establish and maintain relationships, and express creativity and playfulness” (Mayor & Allington, 2012, p. 6). It is tempting to more deeply explore linguistic creativity in general, however the most relevant for the current study is lexical blending in contemporary discourse. A specific type of linguistic creativity is lexical wordplay, an intrinsic quality of human communication dependent upon language users' ability to produce language that is both adaptive to social context, and unique and unexpected yet decipherable by listeners.

The phenomenon of neology occurs almost exclusively by combining or building upon existing words in a variety of ways, such as compounding (e.g., *photobomb*), shifting (e.g., the noun *adult* becomes a verb: *adulthood*), and blending (e.g., *emoticon*, from *emotion* and *icon*)⁷.

⁷ - *Photobomb* - to move into the frame of a photograph as it is being taken as a joke or prank.
- *Adulthood* - to behave like an adult, specifically to do the things—often mundane—that an adult is expected to do.
- *Emoticon* – the use of keyboard characters to represent a facial expression, typically in digital written communication like e-mail (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Blends⁸ are new lexemes formed from combining two words (sometimes more) where at least one has been shortened. Successful structuring of blends is particularly dependent on an overlap of phonological properties as well as the identifiability of the blend's source words (Algeo, 1977), resulting in a new word whose connotation can quickly be inferred through a novel fusion of its source words, merging multiple meanings into one new word.

Blends can be a powerful use of language. Popularized blends and other types of neologisms reflect momentous trends in technology (e.g., *vlog*, *webinar*) and trends in a society – e.g., a vacation at home, or a *staycation*, popularized in response to the 2008 economic recession, or *Snowmageddon* to depict the northeastern United States' unprecedented snowfall of winter 2015. In addition to a synchronic layer of culture in language, creative wordplay can also reflect diachronic realities of society, such as the reification of masculinity in American culture by way of the innumerable *man*-based blend words. As word-watcher and blogger Mark Peters (2010) explains, “it’s a man’s word: a linguistic fix for fears of unmanliness” is to blend *man* with words to add an automatically masculine feature to a concept. *Man*-words can serve as a linguistic symptom of confusion over gender roles, but are also used for a cure by marketers to encourage men to willingly agree to buying mascara, candles, pantyhose, or girdles – or *manscara*, *mandles*, *mantihose*, or *mirdles* – without their masculinity becoming vulnerable to (self-)doubt (Hall, Gough, & Seymore-Smith, 2013). Blending a word with *man* can serve as a linguistic solution to any *manxieties* of perceptions of femininity or homosexuality. Whereas some *man*-words denote “girly things for guys,” *man*-words can also refer to an explicitly male

⁸ A blend is also often referred to as a portmanteau, a description first used by Lewis Carroll in his poem “Jabberwocky.” In French, a *portmanteau* was a type of traveling case and is itself a blend of the verb *porter*, to carry, and *manteau*, coat. Carroll coined the usage of a portmanteau word “after a type of leather traveling bag whose two, hinged compartments could be folded together...” Carroll explains, “You see... there are two meanings packed into one word” (Carroll, 1871/2009, p. 65).

concept, such as *manwich*, a sandwich manly enough to satisfy a *manetite*, that is, a man's appetite.

The facility of blending *man* with words describing elements of communication has proven to be an effective way to convey gendered imbalances in sociolinguistics, with *mansplain* currently enjoying a great deal of popularity. *Mansplain* comes from the realities of women consistently feeling they are interrupted by and talked down to by men. Clearly, a shared frustration of women who feel their abilities, voices, and ideas are eclipsed, disregarded – or even stolen and accredited to a man, as described by another gendered portmanteau, *broropriation* (*bro+appropriation*) – has amassed enough cyber voices to collaboratively craft and circulate new vocabulary to describe these experiences and how they shape women's lives and careers. *Mansplain* and other similar wordplay such as *manterrupt*, *manspread*, and *manologue*⁹ expediently and cleverly compress the meaning of two words into one, providing labels for which these gendered social phenomena can be called.

Studies on the imbalances between men and women's talk largely surrounds gendered interruptions. Although “*manterruptions*” are distinct from the specific phenomenon of mansplaining, the concepts overlap as both are seen to be actions suppressing women's ideas and disregarding their intelligence. Research on gendered interruptions goes back as early as a Zimmerman and West's (1975) study, which suggested that men interrupt women far more often than the reverse. Since then, researchers have continued to refine these results, for example by

⁹ - *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).

- *Manspreading* – Men sitting, particularly on a crowded public transit, with legs spread widely enough to encroach into the space of the surrounding seats. The act is largely seen to be one of ignorance from men's being socialized to think “the world is their oyster” and they rightfully should value their comfort over that of others around them (Khan, 2016).

- *Manologue* – Monologues by men “on the subject of sports teams, cars, women, fitness etc. regardless of the interest shown by the listener” (Fajerman, 2008).

categorizing interruptions as either intrusive ones, usurping the speaker's turn to show dominance, or as back-channeling and affiliative overlaps of agreement or rapport (e.g., Aries, 1996). There is a wealth of literature that considers factors such as setting, styles, and familiarity between interlocutors (e.g., Leaper & Robnett, 2011), as well as research investigating stereotypes such as whether women talk less in general (e.g., Karpowitz, Mendelberg, & Shaker, 2012), why women are perceived to talk more when they still talk less (Bowles, Babcock & Lei, 2007), and why women are perceived to be bossy, too direct, or less competent when they speak as assertively as men (Hancock & Rubin, 2015). Overall, however, there are inconsistent results on whether women are interrupted more, how or when gender-based repression of language occur, and whether such linguistic patterns relate to dominance and power rather than participation or solidarity (see Anderson & Leaper, 1998; cf. Litwin, 2017). Nonetheless, words like *maninterrupt* and especially *mansplain* are enjoying growing popularity in social media, making discussions on gender and language increasingly visible and familiar (Kinney, 2017; Lewis, 2014).

In addition to its belonging to a genre of endless *man*-words, *mansplain* exemplifies another phenomenon that occurs with some blended neologisms whose popularity is exploited to extend to other terms, such as blending {-*itude*} to signify a certain comportment, like the attitude of New Yorkers or of mothers as expressed in *New Yorkitude* and *momitude*, or the endless affixes of {-*cation*}, such as a *golfcation*, allowing for a type of vacation to be described by a single word. An additional layer of neology is added in the rarer occasion of a previously-blended word stimulating the creation of additional blends, such as an individual as passionate about something as an alcoholic's zeal for drinking, e.g., *shopaholic* or *chocoholic*: part of its original source word – *alcohol* – is recognized as an affix that can communicate an entirely

unique concept, like *yogaholic*, that need not be recognizable in order for its intended meaning to be successfully communicated. The popularity of *splain* words then, can be attested to by the fact that *-splain* is a suffix capable of inexhaustible word coinage. Inspiring imitation and appropriation of prolific wordplay, *splain* re-contextualizes its reference to patronizing speech to any identity, discourse community, or conversation topic, to signal presumptuous language that fails to recognize the experience of others.

The variety of *splain* words that stem from the popularity of *mansplain* could also be thought of in the sense of Hebdige's (1984) stylistic practice of *bricolage*. Bricolage is a noun coming from French for which English has no equivalent, but it can be thought of as an umbrella term for do-it-yourself, home-improvement types of projects. Similar to the image conveyed by the French term of an individual assembling a piece of furniture or using scrap materials to repair some old cabinets, in language, bricolage refers to the ways in which speakers draw from their repertoire of linguistic resources to recombine and construct something new, or "to create new twists on old meanings" (Eckert, 2003, p. 43). The process entails the modification of language variables for the production of semiotic systems with new social meaning. As I explain in Bridges (2017, p. 101), when people refer to women's language as *womansplaining*, they manipulate the language and the gender-based assumptions therein by reassigning a contrary gendered affix to *-splain*. Consequently, *womansplaining* diminishes the function of *mansplain*; that is, the idea that men and women can both be accused of the same linguistic offense neutralizes the conjectures that only men are guilty of it, namely when speaking to women. Thus, not only have users made *mansplain* a contronym by reversing its meaning to refer to the silencing of men's voices rather than women's, the antonymy embodied in the analogous usage of *womansplain* also serves as a linguistic tool for retaliation, challenging the foundations of the

issue at hand. The reappropriation of *mansplain* via *womansplain* enforces a metapragmatic understanding of *mansplain*, recontextualizing the issues exemplified through *mansplain* with an opposing viewpoint.

In sum, it is important to consider the aspects of *mansplain* and its consequent imitations because individual words share a relationship not only to thoughts or to human realities and shared understanding of truth, but to a community. New words surface in an act of creation by a single speaker but come to evoke similar ideas for others in a discourse community. The study of linguistic creativity takes into consideration the relation between words and emotions; neologisms not only index experiences and situations, but they are imbued with feelings that express relatable experiences with their discursive potential to simultaneously transform language and social relations.

Identity and Social Involvement in Web 2.0

Mansplain is a descriptor of a real problem in contemporary gender dynamics. Considering this, and the fact that many of the other *splain* words that it has inspired extend to certain social categories by directly making them part of the word – e.g., patronizing speech by White people described as *whitesplain* – it is worth taking a look at how social categories and struggles therein have been investigated in digital discourse studies.

Within computer-mediated communication, research on group identities and societal disparities of power has had to consider: (1) the influence – both negative and positive – of new media; (2) the task of online social justice work and activism and (3) the mutual shaping of identity between offline and online selves. Addressing the relationship between these three points, this section endeavors to outline what is illuminated by the scholarship of CMC in terms

of how people realize identities in SNS interaction and enact identities in order to point out and resist discrepancies in what is culturally valuable.

First, the mediation of interaction on Web 2.0 enables what Castells (2007) calls “mass self-communication” (p. 248); the new media’s characteristics of interactivity, mobility, abundance, and multi-modality have had a critical impact on the process and implications of social communication (Schejter & Tirosh, 2015, p. 797). These features of new media technologies enhance our abilities to interact and discover wide ranges of viral information flows that were not possible with older forms of mediated communication. As with any advancement in communication technology, there are advantages and disadvantages, and there is abundant research on the powers of new media across the spectrum between the uplifting and the harmful qualities of online behavior.

Rivard (2014) describes the culture of CMC one of self-disclosure that contributes to individuals feeling increasingly comfortable with being on display and increasingly keen on consuming the displays of others (p. 137). As far as the adverse side of this phenomenon, one prevalent issue is that while the mundane-but-negative human activities like gossiping and bullying are certainly nothing new, such interactions on today’s social networking platforms are “hyper-transparent” (Mueller, 2015, p. 804). Individual and group interactions become highly visible, on “large-scale, public commercial platforms... and generate storable, searchable records” (p. 805). This becomes apparent when an act of (perceived) hostility, folly, or imprudence goes viral and the actor becomes a target of an Internet mob, which, in extreme cases, can lead to severe consequences, even in the actor’s offline life (for examples, see Hinde, 2017; Kain, 2015; Longnecker, 2016; Saul, 2014; Wingfield, 2014). Another aspect of new CMC that has received significant attention in new media research is the increased possibility for users

to feel disinhibited in the expression of opinions that in their offline lives, they would not disclose. To name only a few studies, research on aggressive language in SNS include rape threats on Twitter functioning as misogynistic weapons to control the discourse of women (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016), identifying racist semantic structures on Twitter (Lozano, Cedeño, Castillo, Layedra, Lasso, et al., 2017), and modeling the normalization of anti-immigrant speech of Facebook users (Kreis, 2017; Marlow, 2015). These studies, focusing on sexist, racist, and xenophobic language on social network sites, only scratch the surface of even graver new media hostility such as the general spread of hate speech on Twitter (Burnap & Williams, 2015), or the correlation between cyberbully victimization on school delinquency and adolescent suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Geel, Vedder, & Tanihon, 2014).

In terms of more positive employment of Web 2.0, there is a substantial body of research on ways that social network sites serve as powerful tools for sharing resources, creating networks of support, coordinating with others, and creating platforms for diverse group voices, all in ways that were not possible with older media. Recently, the focus of research has shifted towards how SNS are able to transform the way people from multiple backgrounds and locals come together, organize movements, and become involved in various forms of activism, and how these virtual activities are mutually integral to their face-to-face networks and offline sociopolitical actions (Juris, 2012). Virtual environments reconstruct boundaries of identities, offering new occasions for users to explore their identities and affiliate with others (Pinto, Reale, Segabinazzi, & Rossi, 2015). This impact of new media is what Juris calls “a logic of aggregation,” addressing the shift from previous patterns of individuals coming together in physical places to coordinate a collective praxis, to the capacity via SNS for individuals to unify and “forge a collective subjectivity” without the need to meet offline (p. 266). Studies that investigate such aggregation

via social media largely focus on a hashtag, as they endow “the grassroots practice official status by hyperlinking lexical items” and making them searchable (Heyd & Puschmann, 2017, p. 55). Some studies include Bruns and Burgess (2011), who looked at community formation around #BlackLivesMatter as ad-hoc communities; how the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls widely promoted and unified voices worldwide to create an online campaign for international political action (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015); and how the circulation of #IranJeans echoed complex transnational dialogue about Iranian identity within a globalized mediascape (Yadlin-Segal, 2017).

While issues such as cyberbullying and e-movements for global political action are not directly relevant to discourse around *splain* words, it is nonetheless worthwhile to illuminate the terrifically diverse things, positive and negative, that people can do on the Internet, where *splain* discourse also dwells. These words, even though they are most often used humorously (Bridges, 2017), can arguably serve as a form of online social justice work. In Goodman’s (2001) terms, social justice goes beyond raising awareness of “issues of equity, power relations, and institutionalized oppression” (p. 5); it requires the challenging of dominant ideology and advocating change in institutional policies and practices. While in this sense, *mansplain* and its variants doubtfully do much, if anything, to bring about any significant offline institutional reform, they may contribute to movements of ideas and realizations. Like a sort of cyber-activism, which aims to educate individuals about social prejudices and power relations as well as to “serve as signposts for other marginalized people and allies who struggle to speak up” (McCaughey & Ayers, 2013, p. 17), many *splain* words are linguistic tools that bring to light and give a name to types of verbal repression. Talking about inequalities in how people talk to each other, which *splain* language often prompts users to do, results in users implicitly questioning

certain norms that exist, and push back against them in various ways. Johnson (2016) calls for the teaching of digital literacy to youth in a way that empowers them to be responsible citizens and human beings by speaking out against online hate speech and harassment. *Splain* language has the potential to prevail upon users to recognize how they may be socially privileged or disadvantaged due to the intersection of their race, gender, age, social status, and other categories. As Kinney (2017) puts it, “Knowing the word [*mansplain*] allows you to discover your outrage. You learn it, then you know what it is you’ve been seething about” (para. 11). In other words, these terms, by describing a style of cross-cultural speech such as between speakers of different gender, skin color, or sexual orientation, allows the oppressed group to identify, label, and critique what it is they have been annoyed by in the past.

The discourse around *splain* words are also works of identity construction, and accordingly, the last point to address is how virtual environments have reconfigured the boundaries of identity construction. Offline identity has received an immense amount of attention across diverse fields of language study such as politeness and joking (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997), gender (Cameron, 1997; Edwards, 1998; Mullany, 2008), and sociolinguistics and diversity (Verschueren, 2004). But identity is sometimes discussed too simplistically, in categories such as individual or collective, or online and offline. There has been a move in the humanities towards acknowledgement of identity as unfixed and hybrid, yet despite increasing understanding of identity as multiple and as a process of becoming and belonging, in terms of online selves, research still requires some progress, especially involving the variability of identities (Hardaker & McGlashan 2016; Kennedy, 2014; Poletti & Rak, 2014).

For Bucholtz and Hall (2005), identity is a collage of conscious and subconscious enactments ascribed intersubjectively and across various dimensions by the self, by others, and

through interactions and negotiations. In other words, it is a kaleidoscope of multiple performances that emerge through discourse. Online and offline selves are not separate entities, but entwined presentations that encompass similar practices of self-creation to the extent that both electronic and physical identities function in the response to the “ongoing cultural demand that we process our selves and our actions into coherence, intelligibility, and recognizability” (Cover, 2015, p. 56).

Social network sites are platforms where users can create and explore multiple identities, including selves that they may not easily enact in offline interactions. While online and offline selves are mutually influential performances, CMC allows users far more management over self-disclosure (Hardaker & McGlashan 2016, p. 82). Affordances, i.e., parameters of a social platform that influence how it is used, impact the types of identities that will be deployed while using a particular SNS. That is, the tools and functions built into the sites influence the nature of our self-presentation and thus contribute to the formation of the identities we create (Gregg, 2014; Rivard, 2014). For example, Morrison (2014) studied the development of the status update affordance on Facebook across its various stages such as its initial form, “I am_____” to its current form, “What’s on your mind, [user name]?” Morrison analyzed how subtle changes in the empty information box and how it coaxes information has affected the types of updates and narratives that users present. Similarly, McNeill (2014) looked at the “technologies of self” in SixWordMemoire.com, where online autobiographers assign traditional social functions of autobiography such as self-monitoring, therapy, and meaning making. Online, users’ micro-memoires are collective acts that would never be possible offline. What results from making ordinary moments visible to others is the shifting boundaries of community and audience; as autobiographers interact with others’ micro-memoires, users construct the social meaning of

those events and consequently those ordinary moments become significant. The insight that emerges from these studies is that digital identity development corresponds with the tools and affordances built into platforms which users employ to shape practices of self-disclosure and the presentation of selves.

In conclusion, to consider the dynamics of social identities in digital discourse in CMC research involves the positive and negative traits of how people use new media technologies, and the consequent task of negotiating multiple identities by participating in, exploring, and/or consuming the issues brought to light by the affordances of CMC (e.g., aggression and harassment, digital citizenship and activism). It is clear that affordances of new media have influenced how people interact, as well as the idea that face-to-face identities, social histories, and the kaleidoscope of offline and online identities matter, even though it is still unclear how precisely particular SNS tools affect emerging shapes and structures of social identities. With respect to *splain* discourse in SNS, the wordplay might provide a lighthearted way to engage in difficult dialogue, which is a necessary part of unlearning social injustices. As Kinney (2017) says, “We plumb our language to find the funniest puns and most trenchant critiques of [prejudice]; we laugh, because humor diagnoses and deflates the behavior” (p. 16). An achievement of linguistic guile, wit, and solidarity, *splain* words may provide users with a tool to identify and critique power imbalances between social groups in terms of how we speak to one another.

In this literature review, I positioned my study in the broader framework of both metapragmatics and social identity in online discourse 2.0, and also in the subfield of studies on linguistic creativity, and as a small, specific type of involvement in issues of social equality and justice.

CHAPTER THREE: MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current study is in many ways unlike previous research on metapragmatics, thus there are no studies similar enough to the present one to serve as a guide for theoretical frameworks, analytical procedures, or research design. This study, then, employs a unique combination of theories and analytical frameworks to achieve an original study on the metapragmatics of *splain* wordplay. In order to conceptualize metapragmatics in critical discourse of Web 2.0 communication, I integrate a pragmatic, critical discourse approach guided by the methodology of citizen sociolinguistics (Rymes, Aneja, Leone-Pizzighella, Lewis & Moore, 2017). Henceforth, I abbreviate citizen sociolinguistics as “CitSo”.

The study of discourse strategies in general exist under the umbrella of discourse analysis (DA), which approaches language analysis by examining patterns of communication across texts and across the sociocultural contexts of those texts, where “text” is any piece of spoken or written language. In addition to the range from more micro, textually based views of language and the more macro views of the social and cultural setting in which those texts occur, approaches to DA also consider the relationship between language and identity. The study of this relationship reveals how language serves as a tool to present ourselves, and the selves we want others to see, showing ways that we enact and invent multiple social identities. DA also considers *intertextuality* (Silverstein, 1976), or how texts are dependent upon other texts; i.e., the way language users perceive and reproduce texts in relation to prior texts. Thus, DA underscores the notion that in all instances of communicative action, people draw on previous knowledge of language to do things in life, such as sharing knowledge, conveying feelings, and accomplishing

tasks. In this way, DA views “discourse” as both the *supply* of our knowledge (our reality is embodied by how we use and understand the uses of language), and the *product* of that knowledge (we apply language to express our reality and create new meaning). In other words, as Paltridge (2012) describes it, “Discourse is both shaped by the world as well as shaping the world. Discourse is shaped by language as well as shaping language. It is shaped by the people who use the language as well as shaping the language that people use. Discourse is shaped, as well, by the discourse that has preceded it and that which might follow it” (p. 7). The circular nature of discourse tells of how language is bound to culture in multifaceted ways, and how the ways we use language is thus a reflection and construction of our social reality. The view of language as a social practice is the foundational principle of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1989).

Additionally, “discourse is shaped by the medium in which it occurs and it shapes the possibilities for that medium” (Paltridge, 2012, p. 7), thus for the study of discourse in electronic media, computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), must focus on language and language use in relation to the modality in which they occur, as well as the modes and genres that shape and are shaped by the discourse within (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). Herring (2004) makes it clear that CMDA is not to be considered a distinct method, but rather an approach to the ways people are able to use language to communicate and dialogically interact across computer-mediated systems with varying affordances and limitations. Considering *splain* language necessitates a framework that copes with the issues of power/dominance interwoven in the structures, meanings, and interactions of discourse, then in tandem with CMDA as an understanding of digital discourse, a critical dimension is required. CDA approaches discourse as a site where power and meaning are contested and negotiated, and the interpretation of meaning

happens in relation to social ideology and power dynamics (Fairclough, 1992). Like Herring, Fairclough states that CDA is a method to be used alongside others for inquiry on changes in society.

Theoretical Assumptions and Principles of a “Critical Citizen CMDA”

With respect to these understandings of discourse and specifically digital discourse, the central methodological approach applied to analyze metapragmatic discourse in this project is a critical computer-mediated discourse analysis informed by citizen sociolinguistics. Since CitSo 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 CMDA.” In the paragraphs below, the theoretical assumptions of critical CMDA and the methodological framework of CitSo are discussed, followed by additional constructs that may inform the analytical approach in this project.

Critical, computer-mediated discourse analysis. The approach of computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) set forth by Herring (2004) and expanded on by Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) provide an understanding of the elements of discourse mediated specifically via contemporary digital media. Scholars of CMDA remind researchers that CMC is unique from offline discourse, in that in addition to exhibiting recurrent patterns and reflecting social factors, digital communication must also be judged under the assumption that it is shaped by the technological features of the systems in which it is produced. Thus, CMDA research must address the question of what aspects of discourse are shaped by the community that interacts on the platform, how strongly, in what ways, and under what circumstances. The approach to “discourse 2.0” makes the following assumptions, thus proposing fundamental principles for research to approach computer-mediated discourse (CMD).

First, CMD complicates traditional ideas of language modality necessitating an update in the *classification of CMD* which considers it as neither written or spoken language, but existing on a continuum of literacy and orality. In addition, classification of discourse types depends on the modes and genres in which they occur, for instance the genre of a blog recalls the discourse types of journalistic commentary or a personal diary (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015, p. 129). Also, the classification of CMD introduces new types of content, contexts, usage patterns, and affordances and user adaptations. For instance, a status update that is available to new audiences is a new type of content in a new context; ‘friending,’ ‘liking,’ and tagging create new usage patterns, and users can manipulate the technological affordances to circumvent constraints which shapes CMD in new ways.

Secondly, CMDA clarifies how *discourse structure* is different with nonstandard orthography and micro-messages, requiring the view to shift away from “sentences” and instead to “utterances” which can be disjointed across a number of posts, such as breaking up a single message across three consecutive units in modes like Instant-Messaging to signal intonation units (p. 132).

The third assumption is that the construction and construal of *meaning* is different in CMD, which is created and negotiated almost exclusively through textual discourse (p. 133), in which context cues are reduced in comparison to face-to-face communication. Discursive and pragmatic meanings conveyed through nonverbal and paralinguistic features like gaze, facial expression, gestures, and intonation are communicated differently in CMD.

The fourth assumption is that *interactional management* is different in CMD: issues such as coherence, relevance, turn-taking, topic development, and repair in CMD can involve multiple participants and is shaped by the characteristics of the platform.

Fifth, the *social practice* of CMD are shaped by the advancing digitization of society. A major impact of this on CMD research has been to consider how digital language practices are not separate social entities, but rather they mediate between online and offline practices. The creation of social reality in CMD is characterized by how users interact and construct identity, and their engagement in digital practices. For instance, CMD research shows a high degree of engagement with media spectacles in CMD, especially on Twitter and Facebook (p. 141). Plus, research shows CMD is an increasingly significant site of participation in civic and political discourses, as well as ideological debates on the societal effects of computer-mediated linguistic forms (e.g., the abbreviations and nonstandard spelling and punctuation in “netspeak”).

Lastly, CMD is *multimodal* when its construction involves types of communication other than, or in addition to, basic text. For example, users can create images with typed emoticons, as well as incorporate emojis, images and memes, animated graphics, audio, videos, hyperlinks, and combinations of these semiotic sources of communication. Studies in CMD consider how these properties influence and shape the outcomes of discourse.

Overall, the main assumptions are that text, context, identity, and intertextuality are different in electronic communication. As CMDA considers CMD as a social practice, it is also inherently critical, and the power relations of DA are also inherent in CMDA. Taking into account a critical aspect to CMD allows for exploring the connection between discourse structures and social ideologies represented by certain social groups, examining how social inequalities are represented, repeated, and resisted through text and talk. A critical-CMDA approach is necessary to establish 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 CDA and CMDA allows for the understanding of CMD 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.

Citizen sociolinguistics. The various subdomains of Discourse Analysis, 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 the discovery of language in use. However, as Rymes et al. (2017) argued that 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. CitSo allows for social science researchers to keep pace with the societal shifts driven by the networks of Web 2.0. Facilitated to a large extent by the massive connectivity and participatory culture of Web 2.0, social sharing of information allows us to see what generates social value. CitSo could be described as a “populist” lens of sociolinguistics, as the citizen sociolinguists are the ones who point out the meaningful distinctions noticeable in discourse. That is, the citizen sociolinguists (the layperson) provides metacommentary on language that focuses on the peculiarities and attitudes that are noteworthy to them. Thus, CitSo not only offers a methodology to manage the evolving ways we communicate, but it also contends with some analytical misinterpretations of language studies: as Rymes et al. (2017) stated, “The sophistication of the research subjects and their own detailed understandings of their language practices has often been overlooked in favor of the interpretations of the researchers” (p. 151). That is, CitSo makes sociolinguistics more connected to the everyday language user.

There is a critical complication, however, in CitSo methodology, which “both mines and contributes to participatory culture” (p. 32). For instance, Rymes’ (2014) *communicative repertoire* concept moves away from marking differences in communication styles (e.g., Standard English and African-American English) and instead aims to raise awareness of the diversity of repertoires (the value of both dialects for speakers in different contexts). It therefore resituates diverse linguistic practices as ones of co-membership - where “shared goals, common interests, and collective practices can be fostered” (p. 6). But expanding our communicative repertoires can risk moving into dangerous waters of misappropriation and its links to power. Rymes provides the following example, “when two white comedians make a video that combines emblems of tough urban existence with emblems of privileged, white youthful lifestyle, are they creating an ironic metacommentary on both youthful privilege and stereotypical urban toughness or using the popularity of ‘urban’ repertoire elements for their own gain?” (p. 80). The question invoked here is whether all communicative repertoire elements belong to everyone, and these situations offer prolific opportunities of discussion for citizen sociolinguists engaged in the multicultural, globalized, and digitalized society. Rymes (2014) advises that in exploring citizens’ knowledge, we cannot only look for intuition into the varied and changing ways people speak, but we should also be prepared to explore the arguments and disputes that develop around cultural (mis)appropriation and its power relations. If we pay attention to how these conflicts develop and dwindle, we can more meaningfully perceive the wider socio-political and economic influences that underlie the reasons for reappropriating certain elements of certain repertoires.

We can see how power comes into play with Blommaert’s (2010) notion (adding to Silverstein’s [2003] *indexical orders*) that there is an *order of indexicality* in these linguistic features, that is, patterns in the social valuation of language. What it means is some forms are

consistently recognized as valuable within a speech community, while others carry less, or no value, for example the merit and prestige linked to the standard dialect of a nation, or the stigma of a non-standard variety. CitSo reveals these orders for us, and often reveals that these orders are more complex than considered by traditional sociolinguistics.

However, before moving further, it should be noted that Rymes (2014) focuses on speech varieties at the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic level, as well as dialects, accents, and languages. The current study is not interested in how particular linguistic elements align with speakers' indexicalized regional, ethnic, or socioeconomic background studied in sociolinguistics, nor their meta-linguistic attitudes towards a speech variety. Instead I am concerned with how someone's online communication reveals their ideologies related to linguistic pragmatics. This study aims to explore metapragmatic language and how it uncovers what people think about the appropriateness of certain words and topics, and how those reflections on language uncover sociopolitical ideologies. Having made this distinction, though, it does not diminish the value of employing Rymes' (2014) CitSo methodology in this study. I believe every aspect of CitSo is equally pertinent in studying language at the pragmatic level. For example, in *mansplain* discourse, a parallel case is the clash between users on what is mansplaining and what is just a man explaining something, or on what topics and in what ways it is acceptable for a man to speak to a woman. Equal to Rymes' examples of potential cultural misappropriation through expanding one's *communicative repertoires*, paying attention to how these citizens' metapragmatic debates play out in their everyday discourse will help us gain deeper insight into larger social axiologies, and ultimately, what becomes normalized as offensive or not, and why.

One difficult issue in qualitative analysis is giving an interpretation of conceptual categories of other humans, without using words that reduce them to one's own cultural lens,

disguised as scientifically objective metalanguage. It is inevitable that our terminologies carry some biases that, after all, stem from our conventions of thought and reasoning, our position in our society, and our discursive objectives for the environment of our field (Lucy, 1993). Moral relativism, or the idea that an individual's beliefs and behaviors are recognized by others in the same way and with the same terms as in that individual's culture (Christians, 2016), is part of what is under investigation in this study. As Rymes et al. (2017) say, citizen sociolinguists make "sweeping generalizations, tendentious claims, pseudo-expert posturing and downright prejudice [which] are all richly on display in online discussions" (p. 165). When we stop asking about the accuracy of these biases, and instead ask about the conventions that regulate how they are produced and received, as well as the motivations and meanings behind the action of expressing them, we see the circumstances under which they become operative and therefore socially valuable.

In summary, as an analytic framework to this study, I use a synthetic approach, integrating CDA specific to CMDA, and the methodology of CitSo. Bringing together CDA and CitSo with the theory of metapragmatics creates a novel approach that aim to produce analyses of how *splain*-centered 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.

Additional theories & concepts. CDA, CMDA, and metapragmatics are all interdisciplinary, drawing from domains like anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics, literary theory, ethics, and philosophy. While critical CDMA and Citizen Sociolinguistics are my primary lenses for approaching my analysis, there are some other social theories and linguistic concepts that I draw from to investigate various strategies and outcomes in the discourse on

splain words. For example, considering two popular *splain* words – *mansplain* and *whitesplain*– incorporate gender and race as part of their meaning, it could be helpful to apply aspects of feminist theory and critical race theory to discourse analysis. Feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler (1990) argues that gender is an improvised performance and avoids the identity politics that map individuals’ ideologies onto social differences such as masculine/feminine, feminist/anti-feminist, white/racially-marked, or gay/straight. Participants in disputes on pragmatic language norms and social groups often align themselves on one side of these binaries, inflecting morality therein, for example framing “feminist” as compassionate and pro-community or as irrational and angry. Additionally, in the analysis of *thinsplain*, the concepts put forth by the research area of Fat Studies and the social movement of Fat Activism may be useful to draw upon. Both challenge the dichotomous assumption that thin people are healthy and responsible citizens, while fat people are blameworthy for their being “diseased” by obesity, beliefs that are widely accepted in society as truths.

The construct of intersectionality cannot be omitted since individuals identify to varying degrees with each of the social categories of focus: gender, race, class, and body size. Intersectionality takes into account that an individual’s various social distinctions such as class, race, and gender cannot be isolated, but rather that they are inextricably entwined (Crenshaw, 1989). For instance, a Black woman’s experience of being Black and her experience of being a woman cannot be understood as independent of one another; her reality as a Black woman can only be understood as two identities that interact and constantly influence one another (p. 141). These identities also intersect and interrelate with any and all of the various forms of social stratification beyond just race and gender.

Lastly, the verbal repression that *splain* words describe may be salient for the first time when some users encounter *splain* words. That is, individuals at times have an ‘ah-ha’ moment of *I’ve experienced that, too!*, due to such condescending explanations being labeled as *splaining* and being identified as a real occurrence shared by others. Thus, another social concept that may be practical is Paulo Freire’s (1970) concept of *critical conscientisation*, which reveals how sharing common ideas, practices, knowledge, and experiences, especially within a context where information is lacking, can provide opportunities for individuals to perceive a sense of belonging within a community, as they join together in dialogue to attain understanding of their social reality. Through reflection and action comes the process of developing a critical awareness of one’s reality, which is vital for the process of changing that reality.

In addition to the theories noted above, some linguistic strategies are also useful for my analysis, such as the act of *double-voicing* (Bakhtin, 1981) and *ventriloquism* (Cooren, 2012), both of which are types of metapragmatic work. Bakhtin explains that double-voiced discourse “is directed both towards the referential object of speech as in ordinary discourse, and toward another’s discourse, toward someone else’s speech” (p. 105). Cooren describes ventriloquism as a form of agency that is at play in all interactions whether we are ventriloquizing policies, dialects, ideologies, rules, norms, values, or identities. Similarly, Bakhtin’s notion of *heteroglossia* states how when we produce utterances, we are constructing texts from many past voices, roles, and multiple identities. All of these theories and linguistic concepts have been useful in the analysis of this study.

Data Collection and Management Procedures

For my study, the principal conditions that drove my collection of materials are (1) that each item either included a *splain* word itself or is part of a dialogue surrounding someone else’s

usage of *[x]splain*, such as a reply/retweet/reblog; and (2) the various platform affordances' influence on how and to what extent I could gather my data. For instance, I considered which content areas (subject headings, original posts, comments and replies) on each platform were included in the search, how the yielded search results were displayed, or the access to other users' discourse surrounding original posts/tweets. Below, I present the data sampling procedure by *splain* word and SNS and I address data management.

Texts and co-texts. The dataset that I collected in order to address the research questions is made up of two types of data: primary texts and secondary texts. The primary texts are individual units of analysis found through the search function, which use the targeted *splain* word. Whether it is itself an original tweet/post or a reply/comment to someone else's tweet/post was irrelevant in terms of data mining and collecting, as I am interested in the texts that use the *splain* word. The secondary texts are other users' replies/comments to the *splain* usage of the primary text at the time of collection, and/or another user's post to which the primary text responds. These secondary texts, henceforth *co-texts* to use Wikström's (2016) label, were also collected, in the event that they occurred. So on Twitter, when a tweet in my search for *thinsplain* was a reply to another tweet, that reply is considered the primary item of data since it uses *thinsplain*; the original tweet to which it replied and any other subsequent replies to the *thinsplain* tweet, are the co-texts. Similar to Twitter, on Reddit, a search result for *thinsplain* could be the word occurring in an original reddit post, or in a comment on a reddit post (as Figure 13 shows on page 91). Regardless, the text in which *thinsplain* was used was collected as the primary piece of data, and any comments on/replies to that piece of data are its co-texts. On Tumblr, the idea is more straightforward: blog posts found in the search were the individual piece of data, and any comments on that post are the co-texts. I omitted co-texts that did not

address the *splain* words or the language that the *splain* word was describing. For example, there were seven replies to the following tweet: “It’s actually ridiculous that @userA has to thinsplain this basic concept to @userB. Wake up.” Replies using and/or discussing *thinsplain* or the so-called “basic concept” that had to be explained would be collected as co-texts, but not replies that are unrelated to the *thinsplain* discourse, such as “She has me blocked, what does it say?”

Rationale for the selection of four focal *splain* words. The first column in Table 1 lists *mansplain* and three other *splain* reformulations to make up the dataset. The selection of *splain* words was done with two objectives in mind. The first goal was for the dataset to represent a diversity of social groups. The four words chosen represent gender, race, class, and body type. Beyond the physical differences in these four “axes of signification” (Hearn, 2011, p. 89), there is also a varying degree of general consideration given to the issues raised by each word. That is, while inequalities and disputes in gender and race are abundant in current social discourses, the issues of class and of body size may be less prevalent. Therefore, these four words in themselves already help illustrate varying levels of zeal towards each issue from the general public.

Secondly, despite the emergence of seemingly endless variations, the selected variants of *splain* needed to be popular enough to generate a set of data appropriate for the study. Additionally, to adhere to the Citizen Sociolinguistics methodology and investigate what carries social relevance, the focal words needed to be meaningful amongst enough SNS users to generate conversation. So, for instance, *customersplain* is a variant I came across on Twitter. However, it was found to be used only two other times on Twitter. Understandably, *customersplain* and many other less-common forms are far from being widespread enough to be considered for a dataset of multiple instances across three platforms.

To narrow down the list of focal words that meet the criteria explained above, I first explored the breadth of *splain* wordplay, the result of which is an ever-expanding list of *splain* variants that I have encountered since early 2017. Based on my observations to date, the variants of *splain* that are used most widely are naturally those that represent a wider scope of individuals' demographic categorizations and sociopolitical talking points therein, such as gender and gender identity, race, class and social status, sexual orientation, and physical attributes like size, shape, and ability. In the proposal stage of this study, it was discovered that a total of four *splain* variants would generate an appropriately sized dataset. The decision to limit the list to four was based on the quantity of discourse expected to be collected to adequately address the research questions while avoiding an unmanageable amount of data. Below I provide rationale for choosing each of the four words that make up this study.

Mansplain. The study would arguably be incomplete without the original neologism *mansplain*, the one that rose in popularity and found itself on several lists such as Time Magazine's 2014 Word of the Year (Steinmetz, 2014). *Mansplain* is mostly likely the original word from which the endless variations for other *splains* have not only been inspired, but even possible; it is on the coattails of *mansplain*'s success that all the other words ride. In addition, it is worthwhile to consider how, if at all, the usage of *mansplain* has changed since it was first studied from uses in the Autumn of 2016 (see Bridges, 2017). Finally, regardless of the status of *mansplain* as the assumed first *splain*, its inclusion in the study is an important one given that it brings up discourses about gender. In the current political climate, many issues are being addressed, and gender no doubt commonly occurs as an element in the most widely discussed social issues. The Women's March of 2017 and the globally spread #MeToo and #TimesUp movements are some current examples that demonstrate the depth to which today's world is

discussing gender roles and gender inequality. As a result, I believe it is imperative to include gender-based discourses in this study.

Whitesplain. The second term represents an array of issues in language related to race, an issue that is also a hotly contested one in today's sociocultural and political conversations. Given movements such as Black Lives Matter, protests for indigenous rights such as #NODAPL, widespread calls for Hollywood to cast more Actors of Color, and bringing awareness to instances of cultural appropriation, the term *whitesplain* has been found to be a useful linguistic tool for a wide range of race-related debates. Additionally, the concept of whitesplaining is becoming more well-known, evidenced by its increased appearance beyond SNS. To my knowledge, at least two comedy sketch shows have featured whitesplaining language: an MTV skit in which White people continuously whitesplain to the Black star of the show (Gutierrez, 2015). More recently, a late-night talk show addressed how White people speak over and redirect the conversation towards themselves in a satirical trailer for a movie called "White Savior." The sketch parodies a pattern in Hollywood films that are ostensibly about the triumphs of African-Americans, but actually focus on the White characters who believed they defended or spoke out for the Black characters despite their actions missing the point or worsening a problem (Ruffin & Meyers, 2019). For these reasons, I include *whitesplain* in this study.

Richsplain. While this term currently does not enjoy the popularity of *mansplain* and *whitesplain*, its occurrence in social media discourses is adequately frequent for the study, and it brings in discussions on socioeconomic status – one that can permeate boundaries of other social categories. Like gender and race, class-related issues make up a significant portion of current conversations on social and political problems. Class differences and challenges therein are not unique to the present day; however, the ways in which people discuss today's class-related

issues, as well as how they intersect with membership in other social groups, are observable in discourses around the word *richsplain*.

Thinsplain. The final focus word was selected because it represents discussions related to body size. Like *richsplain*, this term is not as common as the first two but is certainly used frequently enough to yield a rich set of discourses across the three SNSs. As explained for the other three words above, the usage of this word also sheds light on social issues that occur regularly in nation-wide stories and conversations. There have been movements for body acceptance, for greater inclusion of diverse body types in the fashion and entertainment industries, and widespread backlash against incidents of body-shaming or fat-shaming. Attention to how body image is valued in today's culture reveal some developments in how we talk about physical and mental health, and it reveals which discourses are challenging or promoting certain standards and norms related to body size.

Finally, there are other *splain* terms that also legitimately represent major current social issues, for instance discourses regarding the LGBTQ community by way of *straightsplain*. My decision, then, to include *thinsplain* as the fourth and final focal word, rather than other potential options like *straightsplain* or *cissplain*, is based on a personal interest in the topics that *thinsplain* often describes. Prior to this study, I had spent some time investigating matters of body shaming and the linguistic strategies used by those who are accused of doing the body-shaming and the accusers. Furthermore, some experiences in my own past have been entwined with matters of body image, thus driving a special, personal curiosity to explore *thinsplain*. Equally, I am personally drawn to exploring issues of gender, race, and class. *Splain* variants not included in the current study should be considered in future research in order to gain a fuller understanding of how the *splain* affix is used to discuss issues of various social groups.

Dataset specifics. The dataset, shown in Table 1, is comprised of texts and co-texts from each SNS: 275 tweets from Twitter, 263 posts from Reddit, and 247 posts from Tumblr. Each set is representative of four selected *splain* words of focus. For each *splain*, I collected 10 items from Twitter, a set of 5 instances from Reddit, and 7 from Tumblr. I will explain my rationale for these numbers on the following pages. The retrieved posts/tweets could have any number of co-texts, and eleven of them had none. In the event when tweets/posts generated thousands of responses, I collected up to twenty co-texts to gather a sufficient, but not unmanageable amount of discourse. Table 1 shows the number of retrieved texts, co-texts, and total items for analysis for each *splain* and on each platform. So for instance, on Twitter, I searched for *mansplain* and collected the first ten tweets to make up the Twitter *mansplain* subset. One of the tweets had no comments on it, but the rest had between 1 and 19, totaling 67 co-texts in the subset.

Table 1. Dataset representation of platforms and *splain* words

SPLAINS	TEXTS RETREIVED FROM SEARCH				ACCOMPANYING CO-TEXTS				TOTAL POSTS/COMMENTS/REPLIES			
	Tw	Rd	Tm	Total	Tw	Rd	Tm	Total	Tw	Rd	Tm	Total
MAN-	10	5	7	22	67	80	94	241	77	85	101	263
WHITE-	10	5	7	22	84	54	52	190	94	59	59	212
RICH-	10	5	7	22	41	44	61	146	51	49	68	168
THIN-	10	5	7	22	43	65	12	120	53	70	19	142
TOTAL	40	20	28	88	235	243	219	697	275	263	247	785

Search interfaces and platform differences. In order to gather the dataset described above, the search capacities of original posts and replies/retweets/reblogs of each platform are necessary to take into account. Below I detail the relationship between each platform and the affordances and limitations for my data collection.

Twitter. In terms of searching all user-generated discourse, Twitter’s advanced search offers the most flexibility in relation to Tumblr and Reddit. Twitter offers a search box in which

users can enter a word or string of words with or without a hashtag and find instances of their target word(s). The searched word(s) can appear in usernames or username handles (e.g., christine teigen, @chrissteigen, see Figure 3, p. 27), or in the text or hashtags of any public original tweets, retweets, or replies to tweets. While the hashtag plays a famously important role in discourse on Twitter, I do not focus my investigation strictly on hashtagged forms. If a user searches for a hashtagged word, only hashtagged forms come up in the search results; however, searching for the same word without the hashtag will result in both forms, with and without the hashtag. With the intent to cast as wide a net as possible in searching for the focal words, I followed the strategies I used in Bridges (2017): I made no differentiation between *mansplain* and *#mansplain* in the data collection, and only referenced the hashtag when its function was significant for the analysis.

It should also be noted that Twitter's search feature operates to display tweets that are algorithmically categorized to be more relevant to the user. Although it would adhere to the CitSo methodology to approach the search as an everyday social media user, due to the assumption that the algorithms will yield results that are specifically relevant to me, I choose Twitter's option to display the results in reverse-chronological order.

The last distinction of Twitter affecting my collection is that tweets are limited to 280 characters, thus tweets are micro-texts in comparison to posts on Tumblr and Reddit. Because of this, most qualitative discourse studies on Twitter collect around 200 to 400 tweets, which can include retweets. I have made a distinction between tweets and retweets, retrieving 10 targeted-word tweets for each *splain* word, with an average of 5.8 co-texts. The result is 235 tweets and retweets that create multiple chains of dialogue that discuss a *splain* word.

Reddit. Reddit is a very under-researched platform for research on discourse and linguistics, thus in terms of sample size, there was no typical range or collection to serve as a model for the current project. Many studies looking at language on Reddit focused solely on subreddits (Chandrasekharan, Pavalanathan, Srinivasan, Glynn, Einstein, & Gilbert, 2017) or the site's structures and policies (Massanari, 2017) for instance to analyze the spread or control of hate speech on the site. De Choudhury and De's (2014) study on mental health discourse employed a dataset of 97,661 comments on 20,411 posts which were both web-crawled and analyzed with various software programs. Lewis (2014) included Reddit as one source of data for his citizen sociolinguistics-based study; however, his exploration of reddit was a participant-observer ethnography and makes no mention of extracting data from the website. To my knowledge, the only discourse analysis that collected user-generated content from Reddit is Darwin (2017) who selected 500 of the most recent threads at the time of collection from a single subreddit, representing an online community of individuals identifying as non-binary genderqueer. She does not disclose any details regarding the size of her data, that is, the range of or average word count. Unlike Twitter, comments on Reddit are not restricted in length, so comment threads have an unknown length span.

In order to locate instances in which redditors (Reddit users) use a *splain* word, the search function on the site itself was inadequate as it only searched within the subject headers of reddit (posts on Reddit). Considering the vast majority of reddit are links to external websites, as opposed to texts created by the user within the site, those search results would have been inefficient. Thus, the search was conducted from outside of Reddit from www.searchreddit.com which enabled searches for the *splain* words within the content generated by redditors on Reddit.

As shown in the search for *richsplains*, shown in bold in Figure 13, the results yield instances of the word occurring in both the reddit subject head, and the user comments.

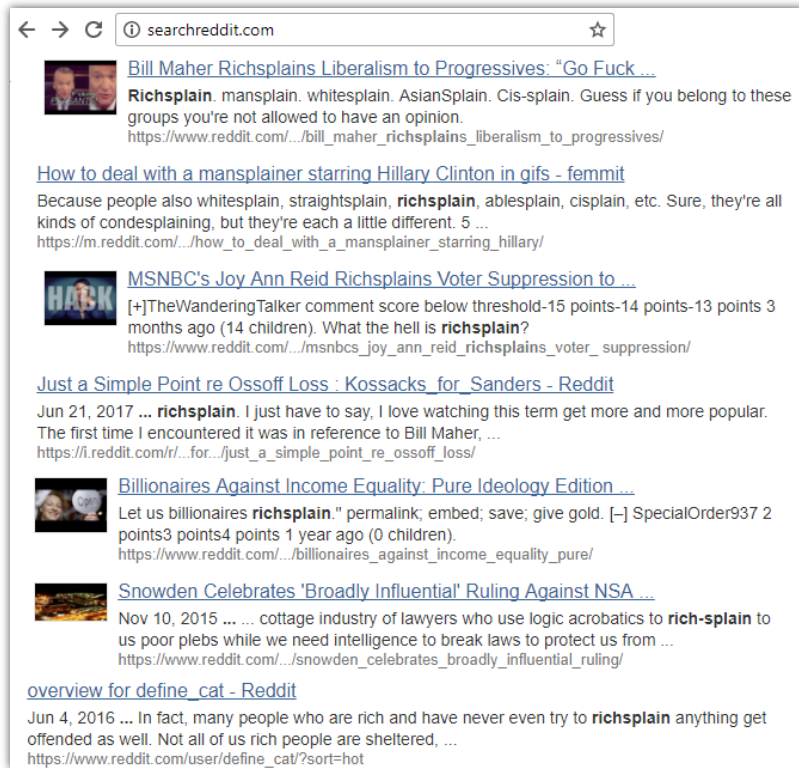


Figure 13: Sample search result of Reddit comment threads

Tumblr. With respect to searching for words on Tumblr, there were limitations. Entering a word into Tumblr's search bar yielded results of occurrences within the names of users and their blog's title, the subject/title of blog posts, and tags on those posts. Tumblr added the possibility to search for full text rather than only titles and tags; however, the feature is only for searching text within an individual blog, not all of Tumblr (Reader, 2015). In other words, if a user includes the targeted word in the body of their blog post, but not in the tags or the post subject line, the Tumblr search function cannot find it, apart from by going in to the individual blog page (see Figure 9) and conducting the keyword search therein. For my study, I used Tumblr's search feature, adhering to my CitSo methodology to approach the data from an

everyday Tumblr user. But in cases when the search results on the site were scarce, I employed Google's search modifier *site:tumblr.com* to search across all blog posts on Tumblr.

Unfortunately, this search engine 'work-around' is not capable of searching for texts within the replies to posts on Tumblr (i.e., in the 'notes'). However, finding instances of various *splain* words within the body of blog posts was possible, and from those results, replies were collected as the co-texts.

Like Reddit, there is very little DA research carried out on Tumblr; therefore, my methodological approach to Tumblr came without much guidance from other researchers. Three studies of use are Connelly (2015), Vásquez and Creel (2017), and Williams (2017). To analyze feminist discourse on Tumblr, Connelly (2015) focused on the search results of three tags. Using the reblogging function on Tumblr to archive the posts and store it to a Tumblr account she created, she collected 150 of the most popular posts for each tag, yielding a dataset of 450 total Tumblr posts. Williams (2017) used the same reblogging approach to archive items into her dataset, she collected 639 individual posts ranging from lengthy texts to only images. In addition, Williams used Tumblr's 'notes' feature (i.e., an accumulation of all likes, reposts, and comments) to source which posts were the most influential, but she did not consider the user comments on posts in her dataset. Vásquez and Creel (2017) focused on the top 'chats,' a genre of "brief, imagined dialogues, posted by a single user" (p. 59); for a dataset of only very popular chats, they collected the first 90 posts with at least 10,000 notes. Based on this small set of previous Tumblr-based DA studies, the number of posts collected for analysis range from 90 to more than 600.

Overall, these differences across the platforms – i.e., affordances, search capabilities, and methods of previous research – therefore influenced the shape of my dataset. Specifically,

collecting instances of language generated by the user on the platform within posts (as opposed to language occurring only in post subject lines or tags, but not within the body) required a search-interface ‘work-around’ for Reddit and Tumblr, whereas Twitter searches posed no difficulty in this aspect. The nature of co-texts and their differences is another element to consider. Reddit brings ‘upvoted’ comments to the top, whereas on Twitter and Tumblr, conversations (often involving many users) are displayed chronologically.

Management and storage of data. The collection of data from social network sites necessitates very close care with respect to storing data. Content displayed on sites is constantly shifting as new information is fed into live streams and millions of users interact with it. Accordingly, my procedures for storing and organizing my data was done by way of screenshots stored in a Microsoft OneNote file. Screenshots are quick and transparent collections of data, and it was also easy to include metadata such as the date and time of the post in the screenshot. I selected OneNote due to its organizational capabilities which includes (1) limitless tabs; (2) limitless pages within tabs, plus sub-pages, sub-sub-pages and so on; (3) the ease of adding, pasting, and arranging text and images anywhere on the page; and (4) searching within tabs or within the entire notebook. Figure 14 portrays a OneNote notebook with numbered arrows corresponding to the numbered points in this paragraph.

In my data storage notebook, there is a tab for each platform. The image shows the Twitter tab is open, and on the right side of the screen are the limitless pages that can exist within each tab. The image shows the notebook page for Example 1 of the *mansplain* data within the Twitter tab. The significance of the text and search bar is that this software allows me to add notes, observations, tags, and any other metadata for each item, and to perform a search for any

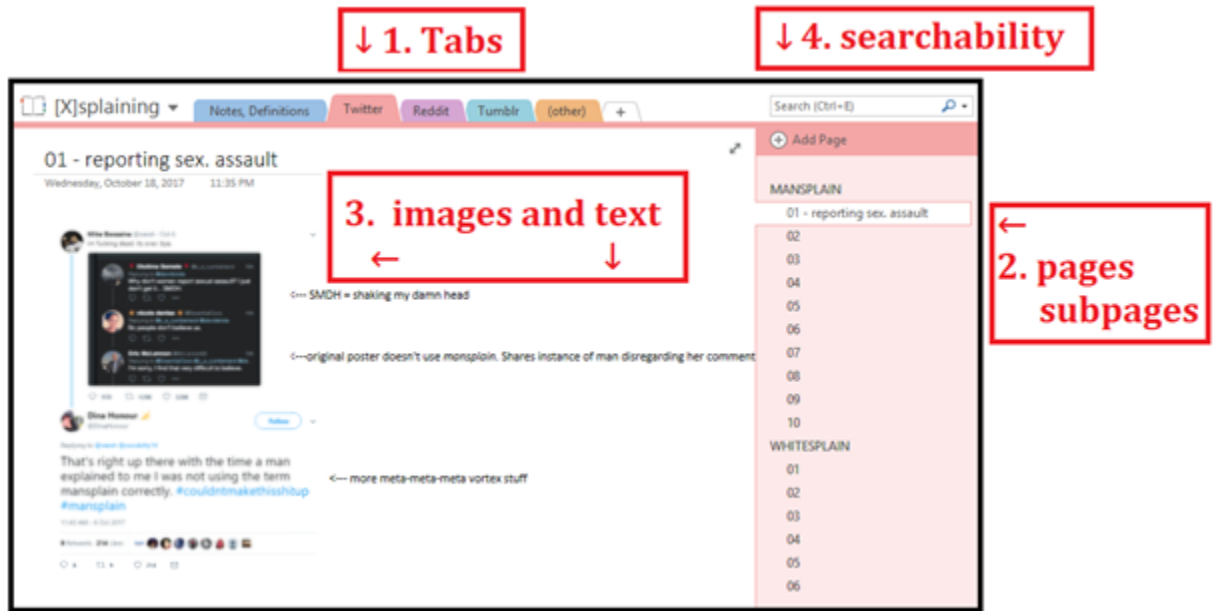


Figure 14: Sample of data storage and organization

metadata throughout the notebook. What this means is that I was able to label the posts with unlimited codes or categories, such as *sarcasm*, *reported speech*, *women's rights*, *affect*, etc. without the immediate need to consider how that post is similar to other posts. Later, using the search function, I was able to filter all the posts that have a particular aspect in common. For example, I could easily pull up all the instances of a hashtag in uses of *whitesplain* across all three platforms.

I labeled each text and its accompanying co-texts with the site abbreviation, the splain subset to which it belongs, and the number. The abbreviations for Twitter, Reddit and Tumblr are *tw*, *red* and *tum*. I used the first letter of the four focus words to mark which *splain* subset it belongs to: *m*, *w*, *r*, and *t* for mansplain, whitesplain, richsplain, and thinsplain. The items are also numbered based on the order in which they were collected and where they exist in OneNote. These labels are used for the texts and the surrounding co-texts. In the analysis, the context of the text or co-text is clarified, thus additional numbering of the co-texts in relation to other comments in the discourse would be excessive. For instance, the first tweet collected from the

keyword search for *mansplain* on Twitter, as well as the corresponding co-texts that were collected, are labeled as (*tw.m.1*) where *tw* stands for Twitter, *m* for mansplain, and 1 marks that it is the first of ten collected mansplain tweets.

Research Questions

In order to investigate the metapragmatics and communicative dynamics amongst social groups in digital discourse, the study asks the following research questions and sub-research questions:

1. What meanings are communicated in the uses of popular *splain* words from texts and co-texts on Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr?
 - a. How do the meanings and uses of the words differ depending on their metaⁿ level?
 - b. What semantic meanings are conveyed?
 - c. What pragmatic functions are employed?
 - d. What metapragmatic strategies emerge?
2. How do the meanings and uses of the *splain* words in RQ1 vary across Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr?

Guided by these questions, the study explores (1) how the discourse around four specific *splain* words reveal issues where social differences and linguistic pragmatics intersect; and (2) how the illumination of these issues might compare in different SNS platforms. In other words, I am interested in analyzing how broader social values become observable in micro-level discursive practices in Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr. More specifically, I employ a Citizen Sociolinguistic methodology in the framework of critical CMDA to examine metapragmatic strategies in the discourse using *splain* words and the discourse talking about *splain* words and language. In addition to the discourse revealing values about linguistic norms, the analysis also

sheds light on the various ways that users cunningly and playfully manipulate language by re-contextualizing and re-appropriating words to create new meanings for a wide range of purposes. The analyses in the following chapter(s) were carried out in accordance with the procedures discussed below.

Data Procedure and Analysis

In this section, I explain my analytical procedures, which are then demonstrated in two sample analyses in the following section. RQ1 addresses the linguistic strategies used in the collected texts and co-texts. The observations provided in the analysis allow for RQ2 to be addressed, which considers similarities and differences across the three sites.

RQ1: What meanings are communicated in the uses of popular *splain* words from the texts and co-texts? The analysis is characterized as a close, inductive analysis; it does not begin with any a priori coding scheme. Instead, the items are read and analyzed individually with a focus on various aspects of the semantic, pragmatic, and metapragmatic levels of the *splain* word in relation to its context.

In order to address this question and its sub-questions, I examined the linguistic structures of the collected texts and co-texts. For **RQ1a**, I coded the metaⁿ level of the word, i.e., whether the word is used as a content word, e.g., “if you mansplain this post, you will be blocked,” if the word is used metalinguistically, e.g., “when will we toss the phrase mansplain into the shallow grave where it belongs,” or if there are additional meta-layers, such as “a man is mansplaining the concept of *mansplain*,” which would be coded as meta³pragmatic language. The rationale for this step is to differentiate between the texts that use a *splain* word as part of their message, and those that discuss the word to refer to the word itself. The instances in which they make up the message demonstrate various ways people use the word to discuss sociopragmatic conventions

and why. The instances in which the code of language itself is discussed provides a perceptual component to the discourse.

For **RQ1b**, I consider the semantic meaning of the word as it is used in the text. For each instance of *splain* words in the text, I attempted to identify the semantic meaning implied through the context of the usage. Some coding categories are “original,” “reverse,” or “unknown.” Original meanings are words that are unaltered, aligning with the notion that *mansplain* refers to when men condescendingly or arrogantly explain a topic to a woman that she already understands. Unaltered meanings befit parallel meaning for different *splain* words, i.e., [privileged group] [x]splains to [marginalized group], e.g., *You literally just told him to hug it out with racists instead of exposing them. You’re whitesplaining racism to a POC (tw.w.1)*. Reverse meanings occur when the word is used to invert the direction of the communicative dynamics assumed in the original meaning, such as when *mansplain* is used to refer to the repression of men’s voices rather than women’s, e.g., *A fair amount of feminists have taken to using mansplain to insult or belittle things that men say or do that they don’t agree with (red.m.4)*. For instances in which it was unclear, I coded the semantic meaning as “unknown,” e.g., *The term mansplain or really \$anything-splain annoy me, like a lot (tw.m.10)*. In this tweet, the user gives an opinion about *[man]splain* but nonetheless, it is not known whether she views the word, albeit annoying, to describe condescending language from a man to a woman, a way for women to silence men, or something else.

The reasoning for this step is because people re-define *splain* words to denote a new communicative dynamic. This not only occurs in ‘cross-*splain*’ formulations (e.g., adopting *mansplain* and replacing the gender nuances with race relations in *whitesplain*), but it can occur in ‘inter-*splain*’ formulations (e.g., re-purposing *mansplain* to mean something new). As I found

in Bridges (2017), uses of *mansplain* carried various, contradictory, meanings. *Mansplain* was born from women feeling their voices are stifled by men, but some users re-contextualized the word in a way that shifted which gender group is the victim of verbal repression. That is, some men's usage of *mansplain* defined it as a linguistic weapon for a woman to silence a man's voice anytime he says something she disagrees with. Therefore, this step will address an important component to *splain* words considering their semantic meanings appear to be adapted frequently depending on the context. Observing the diversity across of meanings of four popular *splain* words provides insight into how each time a unit of language is used, it is shaped and re-shaped by the socio-ideological context in which it occurs (Bakhtin, 1981). Considering the usages of the words from different viewpoints is vital for its interpretation.

Next, **RQ1c** considers the pragmatic meanings of the (co-)texts. Starting at a broad level, I considered what the text is doing, such as defining, denouncing, satirizing, or narrating, making a threat, a request, a complaint, a justification, a question, an apology, and so on. I also code for linguistic markers of evaluation towards the utterance, such as stance adverbs like *unfortunately* or *obviously* that help communicate how the utterance is meant to be interpreted. The study of pragmatics also considers presupposition and entailment which implicitly convey assumptions about the world in which the utterance occurs. Likewise, the flouting of maxims is worthwhile to consider, that is, the meaningfulness behind deliberate untruths, ambiguities, irrelevancies, or incongruities of a message. For example, in "I just love when men try to #mansplain feminism to me," the user's decision to say "I just love" instead of "I really hate" overtly breaks the maxim of quality (truthfulness) assumed in conversation. Sarcasm is successful when interlocutors interpret the subtle falsehood in the message, which requires second-order understanding of the user's intentions. Therefore, the recognition of "I love when men mansplain" as a sarcastic

comment substantiates the user's evaluation of mansplaining as a run-of-the-mill experience. Downplaying the emotional impact in turn amplifies the criticism against mansplaining by portraying it as an experience that women are long accustomed to; showing shock or anger would suggest the opposite. Lastly, I considered the implications of paralinguistic communicative strategies in written language, such as letter repetition, capitalization, punctuation, creative re-spellings, emojis, and hashtags, which provide information about how to interpret the meaning.

The observations from the semantic and pragmatic meanings described above are advantageous for the next step, which considered the metapragmatic operations of the texts. To address **RQ1d**, I drew upon portions of Tanskanen's (2007) coding method, which contends with *types* and *functions* of metapragmatic utterances. Two types I looked for are: whether the utterance is self- or other-referential (i.e., what is the object of commentary, the speaker's own language or someone else's); and whether it is retrospective, mid-message, or prospective (i.e., if the speaker is "re-animating" speech that has already happened, addressing the language of the text itself, or drawing on previous experiences to anticipated speech that may happen in the future). For example, "not trying to mansplain but those ovaries are in the wrong place" would be coded as self-referential and mid-message because the language labeled as mansplain is his own, not someone else's, and it refers to language happening within the utterance in which mansplain occurs.

Some other metapragmatic discourse features that I look for include the use of hashtags and reported speech which can both serve to describe language in use, as well as deictic markers – both discourse deixis (e.g., words that point to place, time, location, or people) and social deixis (language that points to social relations and cultural symbols.) I ask if these

metapragmatic strategies are structuring the referenced speech in a particular way, e.g., as true/false, precise/vague, straightforward/misleading, cooperative/uncooperative (Hübler & Bublitz, 2007, p. 3). These strategies may position or modify the direction of the talk or establish or preserve social relationships.

RQ2: How do the meanings and uses of the *splain* words in RQ1 vary across Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr? For the final question, I compared the findings from RQ2 across Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr by making note of similarities and differences that emerged in the data of each platform. My data are stored and organized in OneNote, where each item was labeled with the coding and analyses described above. I used OneNote in the sense of a simplified corpus frequency search, to be able to filter all instances of any code label within any individual SNS platform, or across all three. This enabled me to identify the similarities and differences of the metapragmatic strategies, meanings, and evaluations that occur across the dataset and categorize them based on the platform. From there, I analyzed what similarities and differences are revealed in the various *splain* discourses across Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit, including comparisons across different *splain* forms, comparisons of whether *[x]splain* is used as content words or metalinguistically, and comparisons of metapragmatic strategies across the platforms.

Ethical considerations. Protecting the identity of participants is the most crucial concern for ethical social science research, and consequently, data anonymization is done to ensure the preservation of participants' privacy. For qualitative analytical approaches, presenting language directly as it occurred in context is a powerful way to present findings that focus on the details of wording and linguistic elements. Equally, as a discourse analyst, I believe in representing the language under investigation in an authentic and transparent manner, i.e., displaying it exactly

how it occurred online. Thus, users' posts and comments examined in the following two chapters are presented as they were posted by the SNS user, i.e., without any changes to the wording, nor orthographic decisions regarding spelling, capitalization, punctuation, or other literacy practices such as emojis, hyperlinks, or superscript that may be afforded by the SNS.

However, due to the elements of “persistence, searchability and replicability” of the internet (Jones, 2013, p. 3), it is possible for online posts/comments to be traced back to the individual user, especially when collected from public domains of the web (Robson, 2017). As a result, despite the data being posted publically, to uphold the standards of ethical research, I anonymized the items with the intent of maximally preserving users' privacy. Firstly, though, it should be noted that the example given in the introduction to Chapter 1 was not anonymized. The reasoning was because the story of @ASTRO_JESSICA was a viral story shared on numerous news sites (e.g., Amatulli, 2016), and before gathering my own data, I decided to use this rather well-known story as an example of how instances of mansplaining can evolve into complex discourses across cyberspace. However, for my own data that is presented in the next two chapters, I anonymized the users. Specifically, in the instances where users share a screenshot of linguistic interchanges, I blacked out the usernames, handles, and profile picture in the figures. Otherwise, the language is presented as text, and I removed usernames, handles, and any other identifying features. I replace almost all account names with a generic reference such as User A, or Redditor B. In the event where the identity of the user is important, I give it a specific pseudonym for simple referencing. For example, in a *richsplain* example, one user's status as a Hollywood actress (but not her precise identity) is important for a comprehensive understanding of the discourse, so I replaced her handle with @HOLLYWOOD. Any specialized pseudonyms like @HOLLYWOOD are explained in the analysis.

Evaluation of Research

In qualitative inquiry the role of the researcher must be addressed. Lucy (1993) explains, in studying metalanguage, one difficult issue is giving an interpretation of conceptual categories of other humans, without using words that reduce them to one's own cultural lens, disguised as scientifically objective. Instead, the eventuality that qualitative approaches carry biases should be clarified; perspectives can stem from one's conventions of thought and reasoning, position in society, and objectives for the environment of our field (Lucy, 1993). The action of examining the research process involves introspection and awareness of the relationship between myself and my study. Accordingly, I outline below my own reflexivity and the validity criteria of the study, followed by the limitations of the study.

Researcher reflexivity. This research entails particular perspectives from the methodological and theoretical frameworks. My position is characterized by regarding reality as a construction that is mediated by language and the creative work of the mind. Similarly, the assumptions of the theoretical framework approach knowledge as a dynamic product of the self-reflexive work of the mind, manifested in social practices and institutions. These ontological and epistemological perspectives combine views from philosophies of critical theory and interpretivism (Paul, 2005). Reflecting on the nature of and appreciation for the subjectivity of one's research offers transparency to the perspectives that are brought to the inquiry and transpire to frame it. To that end, I offer self-scrutiny of my place and position from which I draw conclusions and suggestions.

First, there is a significant relationship between my study and several points in my identity and background as a linguist and researcher. I have long been interested in creative meaning making, the evolution of language, and online discourse. For one of my M.A. theses, I

analyzed the types and prevalence of blend words in online dictionaries. The study fueled my curiosity of linguistic creativity and the role the Internet has on it, and it was also the first time I discovered the word *mansplain*. A few years later, I would publish a study on the word. In the process of that project, I was introduced to the theory of metapragmatics, in which I have since been immensely interested.

Secondly, my interests in online discourse extend beyond my academic self; I often find myself reading comments threads on social media posts. I am captivated by the fact that the Internet can make no promise that a vehement political dispute will not transpire in the comment section of a video of kittens. My own daily uses of social media motivate me to explore and learn about the world through the diversity of voices on SNS. My involvement and background in these realms play a role in the subjectivity of my interpretations.

My role is therefore an emic one, as my previous experiences and daily diversions add to my motivation to carry out this study. In my research, I am compelled to remain self-reflexive about my perspectives as an observer and participant of Citizen Sociolinguistics. The reflection has revealed that biases come from stereotypes, orders of indexicality, and cultural axiology. My goals, though, for this study are not to focus on the content of the comments, but rather the arguments surrounding the topics, and what people do with language in the face of morally relative disputes. Additionally, adhering to the goals of discourse analysis, which are not to make assumptions about what is happening inside the minds of users, my intent is to let the language itself reveal how social categories, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief are constituted in and through discourse.

Validity criteria. Validity in discourse analysis is tricky because as Gee (2014) states, “humans *interpret* the world, they do not just have access to it ‘just as it is’. They must use

language... to interpret it and thereby render it meaningful in certain ways” (p. 144). The analysis carried out in this study therefore represents one of many potential interpretations, and it cannot be considered an absolute one since all analyses are open to dispute. But no analysis can ask all possible questions or aim for all possible agreements, nor can it aim to address all possible related linguistic elements (Gee, 2014). Thus, my study makes observations as informed by the data, and describes them in ways that adhere to the frameworks that structure this study. In terms of credibility, in my study, my analysis will maintain a thorough description of the research context and assumptions that are central to exploring insights that address the research questions. Transferability is achieved in my study by having defined the methodology, data collection, and analytical procedures. Lastly, I have aimed to have as much dependability as possible, that is, the degree to which my findings could be verified or contradicted by others. To deal with this, a rigorous and consistent strategy for representing my data was imperative, which I increased by reexamining my data and coding multiple times to ensure an analysis that is as consistent and rational as possible.

CHAPTER FOUR: RQ1 FINDINGS

In the data set of 88 original posts and 697 corresponding co-texts (totaling 785 items) that were collected through the searches of each of the four *splain* words and in each SNS, the uses of [x]*splain* present an abundance of subject matters, and demonstrate a wide variety of ways that users are able to manipulate written language to be able to effectively interact in conversations on contentious topics.

The close, qualitative analysis illuminated some themes for each *splain* word. These themes are represented by discourse characteristics that are more often seen by citizen sociolinguists to warrant linguistic policing, and they include the subject matter, interlocutor identities, paralanguage, or the multiple layers of context/its contextual condition in space and time. In other words, not only *what* is being said, but *why*, *how*, *to whom*, and *from whom* are all contextual elements that can trigger citizen sociolinguists of Twitter, Reddit, or Tumblr to publicly reframe such language as [x]*splain*ing.

In this section, I explore the meanings and uses of the four *splain* words across the three different platforms, the linguistic strategies used to communicate the legitimacy of their message, and how they connect with larger macro-cultural discourses. In this chapter, the analyses are presented with the goal of answering the first research question and its four sub-questions:

RQ1: What meanings are communicated in the uses of popular *splain* words from the texts and co-texts on Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr?

- a. How do the meanings and uses of the word differ depending on the metaⁿ level?
- b. What semantic meanings are conveyed?

- c. What pragmatic functions are employed?
- d. What metapragmatic strategies emerge?

I have organized this chapter by dividing it into sections: first I discuss a broader analysis of all four *splain* words in relation to the four sub-questions. Then each word is examined individually through an analysis of selected samples from the data set.

Categorizing Linguistic Practices of [X]*splain* in Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, I initially coded the data by labeling each usage of *mansplain* with its meta level and semantic value, as well as any pragmatic or metapragmatic strategies that are performed by the word and/or its surrounding context.

RQ1a. First, I coded for the categories of language that the word can be used for: (1) The words are innately metapragmatic, so the first category is when [*x*]*splain* is used to function as part of the message being communicated, such as *He tried to mansplain physics to her, knowing she's an astronaut.* (2) Meta-semantic language on a metapragmatic word is doubly-metapragmatic, so the second category is when [*x*]*splain* functions as part of the linguistic code, such as *I thought mansplaining was only a thing when men explain womanly things* or *Is whitesplain racist?* (3) The third category is for higher levels, such as talk about an instance of a doubly-metapragmatic use of the word: *A man mansplained to me that I was not using the term mansplain correctly.* The differences of how these occur across *splains* and across platforms is discussed in Chapter 5.

Table 2: Coding specifics and examples for RQ1a

Meta-level	1	2	3
	Metapragmatic	Meta-metapragmatic	Meta-meta-metapragmatic / meta ³ pragmatic or more
Definition	Used to function as a message (the content being communicated). Includes definitions of the word.	Functions as linguistic code; meta-semantic language on a meta-pragmatic word is doubly-metapragmatic	Talks about an instance of a doubly-metapragmatic use of the word
Examples	"He tried to mansplain physics to her, knowing she's an astronaut"	"I thought mansplaining was only when a man was explaining womanly things"	"A man mansplained to me I was not using the term mansplain correctly"
	"Don't thinsplain to me about fat shaming"	"Is whitesplain racist?"	"I especially love when white folks whitesplain why using the word whitesplain is racist."

RQ1b. Next, I coded for the semantic value applied to the term by the user in the retrieved tweet or post. For this element, which addresses RQ1b, the categorization was different for each of the *splain* words. For each *splain*, there is a category called *original*, however the dynamics are different. For example, *mansplain* can refer to a man's explanation on any topic, whereas *whitesplain* is used only when the explanation is on a race-related topic. But the similarity is that the label *original* involves a specific directionality of the language from the unmarked or privileged group to the marginalized or oppressed group.

For *mansplain*, I identified four categories: (1) *original* – condescending explanation from a man to a woman; (2) *multi-directional* – something men and women can do to each other; (3) *broadened scope* – refers to language beyond condescending explanations; and (4) *reversed* – a linguistic weapon used by women against men.

For *whitesplain*: (1) *original* – when a racially-privileged person explains a race-related issue or experience to a racially-marked person in an inaccurate, oversimplified, or overconfident manner. (2) *reversed* – the view that the word is harmful for its ability to hurt race relations, or that it is racist for making claims of all white people.

For *richsplain*, there was little variation in how the word was used or talked about. The only semantic variation that occurred in my dataset involved whether *richsplain* describes the language that talks about the lower-class or language that talks to the lower-class. Specifically, two semantic values applied are: (1) *blame* – richsplaining is oversimplified ideas that place the culpability of poverty strictly on the financial choices of the economically-afflicted; and (2) *suggestions* – richsplaining comprises trite, absurd, or aloof recommendations for poor people to solve the convoluted issue of economic inequality, with an assumption that the suggestion offers a straightforward solution, and that it is a previously-unknown strategy to lower-class citizens.

For *thinsplain*: (1) *original* – when a thin person explains experiences that only a fat person could understand, or explains the relationship between body size and health (2) *authority shift* – the meaning is broadened to refer to explanations from someone of any size that is smaller than the one to whom the explanation is addressed. That is, according to this view, the greater the speaker’s size, the more access they have to experiences of body-size discrimination, the more validity their voices should have, and the more authority they have in saying what is or is not thinsplaining.

As explained in the Data Procedures section of Chapter 3, there were a few instances in which the user’s view of the word’s denotation was unclear, for example, *the word mansplain and really \$anything-splain annoy me, like a lot*. Her opinion about *splain* words is clear, but it does not state why she finds them annoying, therefore we cannot know how she defines it. While this example is from the *mansplain* subset, all four *splain* words had “unclear” as a category.

RQ1c. Identifying the pragmatic functions and metapragmatic strategies was a much more complicated task since even very short texts can be performing numerous and overlapping functions to create meaning in countless ways. However, certain functions and strategies were

noticeably more common. In terms of pragmatic functions, the *splain* texts are most often narrating an experience, making an evaluation about language, and/or justifying a viewpoint. (In essence, the users who make use of these words are being citizen sociolinguists.) These communicative functions are expressed as linguistic forms, e.g., pragmatic speech acts like questions, requests, or complaints.

RQ1d. Similarly, I identified many metapragmatic strategies, or ways that users called attention to language, from which three main categories emerged. One is by recontextualizing the language of focus in multimodal forms, such as re-posting a screenshot of a post from a different site. In this category, users create their own original post that pairs the display of others' language as it originally appeared elsewhere and their own commentary on that language. Relating back to Tanskanen's (2007) coding method (discussed on pp. 38, 54-55, & 100), this metapragmatic strategy is retrospective and other-referential as it is used to index the language of another speaker that occurred previously in time.

Next is re-animating the language of focus: through reported speech, creation of hypothetical dialogues, or summarization, users present the language in a way in which their commentary is embedded within. The third category consists of using various writing styles and intertextual or interdiscursive references as meaning-making strategies. That is, users communicate their observation or stance through devices of written language such as hashtags, scare quotes, emojis, and orthographic creativity (e.g., capitalization, punctuation, spelling).

Identifying these categories described above showed the most common methods people use to call out language they perceive as privileged explaining. However, any possible combination of pragmatic functions and metapragmatic strategies can occur in the texts and correspond with any of the meta-level and semantic categories. Therefore, the analysis below

provides an exploration of how users' ideas can be conveyed through the interaction of these various elements.

Interdiscursivity of [x]splain. An observation worth mentioning is the metasemantic remarks from users that made comparisons of various *splain* words. There were a dozen instances, usually in the co-texts, and all coming from the *richsplain* or *thinsplain* subsets. In each case, the users draw upon the more well-known variant, *mansplain*, to support a definition of *thinsplain* or *richsplain*, or to request clarification from others. These examples are acts of interdiscursivity, that is, mixing the practices of different discourse and the embedded social and institutional meanings (Candlin & Maley, 1997, p. 212). As Vásquez (2015) explains, “Meaning does not reside in a single text, but rather each text derives its meaning as a result of its embedding in multiple layers of pre-existing texts, as well as in social and textual practices” (p. 66). Therefore, in these comparisons, users extend the meanings of the words they are comparing. For instance, in the example below, redditorB asks if *thinsplain* is *the new mansplain*. This question creates a parallel between the meaning of *thinsplain* and *mansplain*, as well as the type of discursive characteristics that both words describe:

(1) redditorA: *Thinsplain?*

redditorB: Is thinsplain the new mansplain?

redditorC: What if a man was explaining how her obesity caused her miscarriage? *Thinmansplain?* I'm excited about this new term.
(*red.t.2*)

(2) Thinsplaining is just as bad as the term mansplaining. Only children make up words like this in an attempt to win arguments. (*red.t.4*)

(3) mansplain - > thinsplain - > what's next? (*tw.t.9*)

(4) Damn, credit for “richsplain” that is the one that makes the most sense out of all the *splains I heard (*red.r.1*)

(5) By now, pretty much everyone who might read this is familiar with the term “mansplain.” [Link to article titled, “Our moral betters generously richsplain path to prosperity”] (*tw.r.7*)

Firstly, these examples from which all other *splain* words are derived provide evidence that *mansplain* is perceived to be the original *splain*. Regardless of whether *mansplain* really was the first of these words, this segment of dialogue from Reddit shows that everyday language users recognize other *splains* to originate from *mansplain*. In addition to these examples, three posts on Tumblr that discussed *thinsplain* or *richsplain* also included *mansplain* in the tags beneath the post, for example: #mansplaining #thinsplaining #privilege #social justice. By referencing *mansplain*, users make a connection between *mansplain* discourses and their current discussions surrounding *thinsplain/richsplain*. Intertextually referencing *mansplain* in their posts on other types of intercultural communication can serve in clarifying what the other *splain* words mean and draw parallels between gendered imbalances and the inequality between other social groups.

Mansplain

In this section, I present the discourses around the term *mansplain* of the collected texts and co-texts, in which the word is largely used by internet users to call attention to language. The language that is highlighted by way of *mansplain* is largely viewed as when a man explains something in a patronizing manner to a woman. A more precise definition comes from a Tumblr user: *Mansplaining is 'Sweetie, you have a vagina, not a brain, let me tell you how things ACTUALLY work' usually followed by a statement containing so much inaccuracy and pure fiction it resembles the latest Fox News report (tum.m.4)*. In this manner, mansplaining not only signifies explanations that are unnecessary, but also the notion that the man's explanation is wrong. This study finds that *mansplain* is the most disputed of the four terms of focus, and the numerous uses, meanings, and functions are analyzed in this section. Before I present selections

from the collected material that demonstrate more specific linguistic features of how these discourses develop, I first present a brief overview of gender in sociolinguistics.

Defining gender. Sociolinguistic research focusing on gender has evolved a great deal in the past two decades. Once organized around the view of gender as a binary difference, gender has since come to be understood as a paradigm of diverse identities and practices (Wodak, 2015). Different models of gender have been theorized over the years, notably the “dominance” and “difference” approaches to gender, marking a shift between the Lakoffian view and that put forth by Deborah Tannen (1994). The “difference” approach interprets manifestations of “powerless language” of women, viewing the communicative behaviors of men and women to have originated from differing socializations, but still equal in meaning and influence. The “difference” approach views gender as socially constructed, yet still views gender as something indistinguishably based on one’s biological sex. As language and gender scholar Deborah Cameron (2005) explains, this “modern” feminist approach views gender as “something you *have*” (p. 484). Cameron identifies the next key shift in approaches to gender as a postmodern turn, where “gender is something you *do or perform*” (p. 484, emphases added).

In addition, in recent decades gender has shifted from a binary regard of male or female to a fluid construct. The relatively new notion of “nonbinary” acknowledges gender identities that are somewhere on a spectrum that may be between or beyond the binary of man or woman. This view then recognizes that gender identities may incorporate varying characteristics of both man and woman, of only man or woman, or neither man nor woman. According to Hegarty, Ansara, and Baker (2018), about 0.4% of the population, and about one-third of people who identify as transgender, do not identify as male or female. Many nonbinary identities have been defined, such as *gender neutral, androgynous, demi-man/boy/woman/girl, pangender, bi-gender,*

gender fluid, or *genderqueer* (p. 56). Furthermore, Hegarty et al. (2018) say that the idea of multiple, nonbinary gender identities is only a new or radical idea for some of the world; “In the majority of the societies in which the world’s people now live, many other different gender systems are practiced” (p. 53). In the “majority world view,” gender is nonbinary and it is a performance through which a number of functions may be served, separately or simultaneously, e.g., to fulfill individuals’ identity maintenance and self-positioning for various social roles, and/or to fulfill “normative categories through which societies are organized” (p. 54). Thus, gender *can* but does not necessarily *have to* align with biological sex, nor with socially-constructed gender roles.

In poststructuralist approaches, gender is understood in terms of how it is represented in language, but not as something that is strictly embodied by the speaker in terms of biology, but rather an ideology, a way of seeing the world, which is often influenced by stereotypes as well as certain epistemic, ontological, and axiological views (Wodak, 2015). Understanding gender as something that is “performed” through language comes from Judith Butler (1990); gender is constructed, accomplished, and realized by language. Taking on this outlook, many contemporary sociolinguists view gender not as a collection of fixed characteristics, but instead explore the attributes of men, women, and nonbinary identifying genders, and “interpreting them as ‘gender-specific’ or ‘gender-typical’ attributes so as to reveal the asymmetry of the difference between the sexes, to criticize it, and to make it politically visible” (Wodak, 2015, p. 701). The poststructuralist understanding also concerns gender diversity as it intersects with class and ethnicity, as well as the multiple ways masculinity and femininity can be accomplished and interpreted (e.g., Cameron, 2005).

As a researcher, I align my understanding of gender with poststructuralist feminism, which views gender as a fluid, discursively constructed category that is performed through language and that inextricably intersects with race, class, and body size (without ignoring other axes of signification that are not the focus in this study, such as age, religion, sexuality, dis/ability, or national identity). However, the analysis in this section explores how SNS users talk about language in relation to gender, and when referencing speakers who mansplain, users primarily referred to gender categorizations as *men/man/woman/women*. The discussions of gender and language in the data focus on the binary identities of *male* and *female* and the differences in language norms between those two predominant groups. In the sections below, the uses of *man/men/woman/women* do not intend to categorize all members of society into two binary groups; my intention is to present the ways that SNS users themselves discuss gendered imbalances in language.

Furthermore, internet users' gender identities cannot ever be known, even if their profile picture and username give the impression of a particular gender identity. Thus, it is important to note that in the analyses below, when I use gendered pronouns, the pronouns match the gender presented by the user, even though they may not unequivocally represent the accurate offline gender identity. For each item on Twitter and Tumblr, the name and profile photograph were used to presume users' gender. For example, an account with Megan in the username and/or biography, and a photo of a young woman in the profile image would be categorized as a woman. On Reddit, there is no profile photo or user biography, and usernames that give no hint of gender identity, like boltsfan99, are common. However, in some cases, a gender identity is presented by the user, such as with usernames like mister_man or yoga.momma; through statements in comments like, "As a father of three teenagers..."; or with the option to have the

symbols ♂ or ♀ appear next to users’ comments in some subreddits. When their gender is unknown, I refer to the pseudonym. The following subsections take a closer look at the data and how they help answer the four subquestions of RQ1 for *mansplain*.

RQ1a – Meta-level of *mansplain* uses. The subset of *mansplain* discourse consists of 263 texts and co-texts from the three SNS. Specifically, as shown in Table 1, there are 22 texts retrieved from the keyword search, and 241 co-texts. While all the co-texts are relevant to the discourse of which the primary text is a part, not all of them actually used the word *mansplain*. For instance, in the string of tweets making up the eighth Twitter example (*tw.m.8*), *mansplain* is only used in the fifth tweet in response to the language occurring in the four preceding co-text tweets. Therefore, for RQ1a and RQ1b, I focus only on the 22 primary texts, and any of the co-texts that actually use *mansplain*, in order to examine the differences in how the word is used.

In the *mansplain* dataset, the word itself appears 54 times, which illuminate numerous ways that people talk about gender-related issues, and how the neologism helps initiate and intensify these discussions. Table 3 shows the distribution of how *mansplain* is used across the three platforms:

Table 3: *Meta-level of uses across platforms – RQ1a for mansplain*

Meta-level MAN	1			2			3		
	texts	co-texts	total	texts	co-texts	total	texts	co-texts	total
Twitter	7	4	11	2	2	4	1	1	2
Reddit	2	7	9	2	6	8	1	1	2
Tumblr	3	4	7	4	6	10	0	1	1
Total	12	15	27	8	14	22	2	3	5

In the previous section of this chapter, “Categorizing linguistic practices of [x]splain,” I explained how I categorized the various “meta-levels.” In short, words used in the message,

usually as a verb, are meta-level one; when users discuss the word metasemantically, such as *the word mansplain is sexist*, it is labeled as meta²; and when both occur, e.g., *is he mansplaining the word mansplain?*, it is categorized as meta³. Potentially higher levels can occur, but there were no instances in this study's *mansplain* data.

Table 3 shows that each column corresponds with one of the above meta-levels. There is a fairly even distribution of instances which talk about the word (22 times - 41%), and instances that use the word in the posts' message (27 times – 50%). Plus, five instances (9%) do both at the meta³ level. What is interesting about *mansplain* is that unlike other *splain* words, there were no instances in which users appear to have just learned about the word, or in which their posts offer a definition of the word in a way that intends to inform others of the word's existence and/or meaning¹⁰. When the word is used or discussed metasemantically, they share their opinion on it or use it to introduce a conversation, but their posts and comments demonstrate some *a priori* knowledge of the word, as well as an assumed *a priori* knowledge of it amongst their readers. The next ten examples exhibit how users initiate conversations about *mansplain* in ways that suggest an assumed intersubjective understanding of the word.

- (1) What's your best mansplaining story? (*red.m.3*)
- (2) How do you feel about the term mansplaining? (*red.m.2*)
- (3) How to avoid 'mansplaining'? (*red.m.5*)
- (4) Mansplaining pro-tip [BLOG TITLE OF POST THAT ADVISES WOMEN ON HOW TO DEAL WITH BEING MANSPLAINED TO] (*tum.m.1*)

Each of the examples above are titles of original posts or blogs (i.e., they are not comments on a pre-existing post). Examples (1) through (3) come from Reddit and are all

¹⁰ In some cases, users do explain what the word means, or, like in example (7) below, define the word by explaining what it does not mean. However, there is still a clear assumption in these examples of an *a priori* familiarity of the word, whereas amongst the posts discussing the other *splain* words, there are several examples of posts that provide a dictionary-style definition, e.g., *Richsplaining: When a person who hasn't experienced poverty gives you patronizing advice on how to get out of poverty* (*tum.r.3*). In the current *mansplain* dataset, this practice did not occur.

questions posted specifically for others to answer with their own stories, opinions on the word, and with advice for men on how to explain things to women without being accused of mansplaining. Example (4) is a Tumblr blog that advises women on how to deal with being mansplained to, starting off with *instead of saying “I know” over and over until you die, try one of these*, followed by a list of responses a woman can say that would supposedly be successful in ending the mansplaining experience, i.e., make the man believe her when she says, “yeah I know.” The commonality between these examples are that they embed *mansplain* in the title of the post, yet provide no explanation of *mansplain*. The texts that follow begin immediately with addressing the goal of the post. For example, in (2), the user starts the body of the post saying, *I haven’t encountered it IRL [in real life], but [...]*, and other users reply and give their opinions. That these users did not consider it necessary to provide an explanation of what they mean by *mansplain* reveals assumptions of intersubjectively shared views. Their decision, then, to open a dialogue with other SNS users in this manner is virtually saying, “Let’s talk about mansplaining. We all know what it is, so let’s jump right in. Share your stories/thoughts/advice.”

The status of *mansplain* in the general public’s lexicon can also be seen in posts or tweets that comment on the evolution of the word, e.g., examples (5) through (7). The user in (5) communicates her assessment of the evolution of *mansplain*, suggesting that it was once used only in a humorous manner. The internet is a fertile hotbed for wordplay and neologisms, but the vast majority of made-up words do not prevail for long as new talking points, new meaning-making strategies, and new SNS practices are constantly cycling in and out. So, the observation that *mansplain* has begun to be used *seriously*, or as a “real word” so to speak, provides some evidence that *mansplain* has perhaps enjoyed a longer shelf life than what some might expect from a comical neologism. Thus, the term has not just avoided a decline in popularity in the past

10 years – since 2009, when it gained attention in a viral blog post – but instead it has become more recognized and has successfully spurred countless other *splains*. So, as language reflects society, many neologisms come and quickly go since they are only useful while the concept they describe remains relevant. The relative durability, then, of *mansplain* suggests the pervasiveness and increasing awareness of the gendered communicative imbalances that the word describes.

- (5) I can't believe we've come to a point in modern age where the term "mansplaining" actually is used, and seriously tho (*tum.m.1*).
- (6) In one year we've gone from "Stop mansplaining!" to "Please mansplain!" Leftism isn't a coherent philosophy. It's a vile, reactive, destructive cancer. [LINK TO ARTICLE: 3X AS MANY MALE MANAGERS ARE NOW UNCOMFORTABLE MENTORING WOMEN IN THE WAKE OF #METOO. THIS IS A HUGE STEP IN THE WRONG DIRECTION. WE NEED MORE MEN TO #MENTORHER. LEANIN.ORG/MENTORHER] (*tw.m.3*)
- (7) Daily reminder that mansplaining is not:
 - a friendly exchange of information between two people
 - someone explaining something they're good at to someone who isn't (and expressed the desire to learn something from this particular field in this particular moment)
 - an answer to someone's question (*tum.m.5*)

The author of example (6) directly specifies his thoughts on how *mansplain* changed in a year. While the author of (6) uses the word to support his argument against leftism and the #metoo movement, his position is analogous with many others in the data whose complaints about the word are that women allegedly overuse it, and it is a force of oppression against men. In example (7), the user explains what the word does not mean. The intent is not to introduce a new word to her audience, but rather to address how the word's meaning has evolved. The users' assumption of readers' previous knowledge of *mansplain* is communicated via pragmatic implicature, positioning the explanation as a *reminder*. The post shows that the user has observed *mansplain*'s meaning being reshaped and expanded to refer to situations described in the three points. Through this post, the user aims to re-legitimize the word, by helping to restrict its scope.

All told, in order to point out changes in a word's usage or common misuses of any word, one must have had multiple encounters with the word, and over a sufficient amount of time. Given that fact, examples (5), (6), and (7) consequently contribute to the argument here of *mansplain*'s distinction and longevity as a neologism.

Examples (8) through (10) also shed light on the duration of *mansplain* by its status as the original *splain* that inspired other wordplay to describe gender-related issues. In (8), the tweet not only demonstrates that mansplain has begotten other *splains*, but that the user has come across them often enough for them to annoy her *like a lot*. Other *man-* words are also grouped with *mansplain* in example (9), in which the user clearly communicates his aversion to gendered words. In example (10), the user reblogs a tweet (Figure 15) in which word play is used to build upon *mansplain*, a humorous suggestion, but one that nonetheless speaks to the impression that *mansplain* has been around long enough to need no introduction and can in fact be replaced with a new term – one that slightly less directly incorporates the male gender and language habits. That is, referring to *correctile dysfunction* as a “new favorite,” presupposes the existence of an older form of mansplaining. The post implicitly communicates that *mansplain* is well enough established to be an “older” version, and does so in a way that portrays the reality of its “older” status as a taken-for-granted truth.

(8) The term mansplain and really \$anything splain annoy me, like a lot 🍞 (tw.m.10)

(9) Things that don't need the word “man” in front of it:

- Mansplaining
- Manterrupting
- Manspreading (tum.m.7)

(10) “Correctile dysfunction” is my new favorite term for mansplaining. [ATTACHED IMAGE OF A TWEET IN FIGURE 15] (*tum.m.2*)



Figure 15: Screenshot of tweet, shared on Tumblr blog (*tum.m.2*)

Each of the ten examples above were original posts, meaning they used *mansplain* and introduced the topic that led to discussions in the subsequent replies from others, without ever defining the word. In each, as well as the tweet shown in Figure 15 no explanation of what *mansplain* is or what it does or does not mean was mentioned. This pattern strengthens the indication that *mansplain* and what it describes, at least in digital discourse, has come to be relatively well-known to the public, especially in comparison to other *splain* words. (I more fully address this point of the comparative awareness of *whitesplain*, *richsplain*, and *thinsplain* in the following sections.)

Based on this finding and out of curiosity, I looked for *mansplain* in various corpora; the searches resulted in very few items, if any, in corpora that do not focus on web-based language¹¹. However, on two different sites, GoogleTrends.com and also an n-gram viewer called “How the internet talks: Well, the mostly young and male users of Reddit, anyway,” the results (see Appendices A and B) display how *mansplain* has steadily risen in usage on the internet between about 2009 and 2018. In contrast, searches for *white-*, *rich-*, and *thinsplain* yielded barely enough

¹¹ A search for *mansplain* on the Corpus of Contemporary American English (<https://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>) resulted in only three hits. On Google’s n-gram viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>) which searches Google Books, no results for *mansplain* came up. On Mark Davie’s iWeb corpus (<https://corpus.byu.edu/iWeb/>), there were 141 results, but the option to view their appearances over time was unavailable.

results to be visible on the graphs (Olsen & King, 2017; <https://www.google.com/trends>). This confirms users' impressions of *mansplain* as the first *splain* that motivated the coining of any and all other variants they have and will encounter.

The next finding from RQ1a worthy of note are the instances that function as meta³pragmatic, which were found on all three SNS. One type of meta³pragmatic uses is the direct attention to the word and the action at the same time, such as those presented in Bridges (2017) –*He's about to mansplain 'mansplain'?* and *Mansplaining man gonna mansplain* (p. 99). Because *mansplain* is a metalinguistic word, if a man talks about *mansplain*, they risk exposing themselves to accusations of mansplaining the word *mansplain*, since the experience of being mansplained can be categorized with other experiences primarily lived by women. One similar instance in the current Twitter data (a co-text whose primary text is discussed later in example 17) is shown in example (11). This utterance in (11), as well as those from Bridges (2017), are women's retorts to men's explanations that humorously censure the man not only for mansplaining about the correct usage of a word, but for mansplaining about the experience of being mansplained to:

(11) That's right up there with the time a man explained to me I was not using the term mansplain correctly #COULDNTMAKETHISSHITUP #MANSPLAIN (*tw.m.1*)

In utterances such as these, when *mansplain* is used meta³pragmatically to comment on a male speaker mansplaining *mansplain* to a woman, back-and-forth dialogues about whether a man was mansplaining – which develop into metasemantic disputes of *mansplain* – make the accused vulnerable to proving his accusers right. As an example, in (12), the retrieved text is a tweet by @JW who shares a screenshot of a dialogue on Twitter between a woman and a man, labelled @USERF and @USERM respectively:

(12) @JW: I present to you a mansplain worthy of a place in the Louvre:



@USERM: @JW not mansplaining. It's correcting a mistake

@USER3: @JW You mansplained to a mansplaining man? :P mansplainsplain
(tw.m.2)

Considering that part of what *mansplain* describes is men's correcting women, often inaccurately, the tweet in (12) is a sound example of "a mansplain," to borrow the noun form used by @JW. Other users responding to @USERM's reply accused him of *burying [him]self even deeper under mansplainer evidence*, for mansplaining whether his menstrual-cycle tweet was mansplaining, for example @USER3, whose comment is addressed to @JW. This user identifies @USERM's reply as a sample of mansplaining and shows her metalinguistic awareness of the multiple levels of mansplaining with *mansplainsplain*. Affixing *mansplain* to the *splain* base, @USER3 effectively describes the meta³ level of what is happening in (12) with one word – a word that expresses the act of a man mansplaining the meaning of *mansplain*. That is, she is

using *mansplain* to describe @USERM’s language while simultaneously pointing out the word *mansplain* metasemantically.

While examples (11) and (12) are more clearly mansplaining *mansplain*, the users in the following three examples do not use the word themselves but count on others to do so to make their point. In (13), four different users whose usernames, handles, and/or profile photos present themselves as male respond to the tweet by @USERS (whose account presents a female identity). In responses from @R1 and @R2, both users are deliberately mansplaining to @USERS about *splain* words for a humorous effect. In the first, he assumes to know more than her about *splain* words and why they are needed; the second goes for a correction to playfully mansplain, introduced with *Actually*, a discourse marker that functions as a “general-purpose signal for a counterclaim” (Smith & Jucker, 2000, p. 214). @R3 uses some additional wordplay *dick-tionary* to make an evaluation of people who use the word *mansplain* as man-haters who dislike using the “real words” in the dictionary. Finally, the fourth reply continues to build upon the wordplay and humor, indicating that @USERS is splaining about *splains*.

(13) @USERS: The term mansplain or really anything \$splain annoy me, like a lot 🍌

@R1: Look, let me explain to you why we need these terms...

@R2: Actually, 🍌 is see no evil and mansplaining is more about what you hear.

@R3: ...people who use mansplain don’t like the dick-tionary.

@R4: What’s with this splain-splaining? (tw.m.10)

On Reddit, comments on a post about *mansplain* use creativity and metapragmatic skills to jokingly mansplain to make a point about mansplaining. That is, rather than saying, “Mansplaining is...” they instead pretend to mansplain, in turn describing their perspective on what it means to mansplain:

(14) RedA

Where does a mansplainer get his water?

From a well, actually...

RedB

Um, actually, the majority of the water is usually obtained by dams and aqueducts, which is a type of water delivery system the Romans invented more than 100 years ago.

RedC

don't you mansplain to me

RedD

Well, ackchyually...

(*red.m.4*)

The first comment from RedA makes play on the homograph *well* and its capability to be a discourse marker, or a noun referring to a water source. The joke makes a link between saying, *well, actually* and mansplaining. Like language ideologies, humor also depends upon a set of shared beliefs for social meaning to be possible, thus implying that *well actually* is a familiar and noticeable way that condescending corrections begin. Like example (12), the word *actually* is shown to be a well-known marker of an obvious divergence in the propositional attitudes of the speaker and his addressee (Smith & Jucker, 2000, p. 211). The joke's citation of *actually* enables the linguistic interaction to assume a wider social meaning. RedD furthers the commentary to the phonetic realization of the phrase, writing *ackchyually* to reflect the shared understanding of the auditory aspects of a drawn out, exaggerated enunciation, calling to mind a pompous voice. RedB stays within the same frame as RedB, building on the noun *well* in the performed mansplaining. The word *actually* also shows up in RedB's comment, in which RedB provides a correction, a correction that they composed to sound superficially intelligent but also feign ignorance with the comparative *more than 100 years ago*, rather than a time interval more relevant to facts about ancient Rome.

These examples of (meta-meta-)metapragmatic speech offer several insights about the metapragmatic elements of *mansplain*. For one, citizen sociolinguists' metapragmatic awareness is observable in how users discuss and dispute norms of gender and language – often through creative language play. Secondly, this level of speech also supports the notion that *mansplain* appears to have become a well-known word, as discussed previously, since it is not necessarily uncommon for users to employ the word at the meta³ level, (uncommon in comparison to my previous work on *mansplain*, and especially so in comparison to the other *splains* in this study). In other words, whether the object of discussion is the language labeled as *mansplain*, the word *mansplain*, or the larger phenomenon of both happening at once, the additional layers of metapragmatic awareness speak to an increased “conscientization” – i.e., the becoming aware – of how language works, what mansplaining looks like, and how *mansplain* is evolving. As citizens become more aware of the intricate relations between gender and language practices through discussions of language and gender, and discussions about those discussions, and so on, they are in turn exposed to more realities and values beyond their own.

This subsection, aiming to address RQ1a for *mansplain*, has presented numerous ways the word is used, the differences that occur in their varying meta-level uses, and potential implications of those differences. The findings show diverse attitudes towards *mansplain*, and conflicting attitudes about the word are found at the meta² level, when people are discussing the word metasemantically. Yet, in satirizing the word, users show their awareness of the type of language *mansplain* describes. Thus, although “made up words” are an annoyance for some users, the gendered communicative dynamics are nonetheless a recognizable phenomenon, and users' familiarity with it is demonstrated through their playful enactments of what mansplaining

looks like. In the next section, I continue the analysis of how users consider the word *mansplain*, focusing specifically on the semantic values bestowed onto the word.

RQ1b – Semantic values of *mansplain* expressed by SNS users. Word meanings are not fixed; they are flexible and indeterminate, constantly changing as they are applied to describe new experiences in new ways. Adaptation and appropriation¹² of word meanings is what drives language change, and by adapting and appropriating words for new situations, new categories are formed that modify the framework of previously-existing categories. The study of semantic change is an extensive one, useful for studies of language contact, language change, and cognitive linguistics. There are numerous consequences of semantic shift such as broadening, narrowing, amelioration, or pejoration of meaning (e.g., Ullmann, 1962). In digital language, numerous influences driven by individual, institutional, and sociocultural forces work to shape the meaning of *mansplain*. This section considers the ways that users adapt and reappropriate the meaning of *mansplain* and how those varying meanings shape the discourse as well as align or distance individuals from certain views on language and gender.

In categorizing the different semantic values ascribed to *mansplain*, four main perspectives emerged on what the word means. Specifically, I identified different ideas of who can *mansplain* (e.g., all men, some men, women); what *mansplaining* language looks like (interruptions, corrections, requested information, various topics); who can be mansplained to (only women, or men, too); and whether the concept that *mansplain* describes is a real phenomenon. These categories are not static and isolated; at times some uses could represent multiple categories, and other times, the meaning of the usage was unknown, (represented in the

¹² Heyd and Puschmann (2017) describe *adaptation* as a process in pragmatics of using language (or a type of language, such as a word in hashtagged form) in a new context; whereas *appropriation* is a similar process in sociolinguistics, but has the socially motivated, and more conscious-level goal of human agency to change the word.

fifth column in Table 4). Table 4 shows the division of the four meanings across each SNS platform.

Table 4: Distribution of mansplain meanings across SNS

	Original	Not Uni-Directional	Broadened Scope	Reversed	Unknown
Mansplain meaning	condescending explanation from a man to a woman	something men and women can do to each other	refers to language beyond condescending explanations	illegitimate term, linguistic weapon used by women against men	unclear how user would define
Example	<i>When he tries to mansplain your major to you (tw.m.5)</i>	<i>Why is it mansplaining if women do it too? (red.m.4) Men mansplain to other men. (tw.m.7)</i>	<i>In one year we've gone from 'Stop mansplaining!' to 'Please mansplain!' [Link: article about women asking men to mentor them] (tw.m.4)</i>	<i>the term is mostly used to dismiss something a man has said that a woman dislikes (red.m.5)</i>	<i>The term mansplain annoys, like me a lot (tw.m.10)</i>
Distribution of semantic values					
Twitter (% of 17)	65%	11.7%	5.8%	11.7%	5.8%
Reddit (% of 19)	31.6%	10%	5.3%	42.1%	10.5%
Tumblr (% of 18)	77.8%	1.1%	0%	1.1%	0%
Total (% of 54)	57.4%	11.1%	3.7%	22.2%	5.6%

Table 4 shows that in the majority of the 55 times the word was used in the (co)texts, users employ the original meaning, especially so on Tumblr and Twitter. It is the unaltered definition that understands *mansplain* to refer to a man explaining to a woman something that she already understands in an (often obviously) condescending fashion. In contrast, in over a fifth of the items –mostly on Reddit – the word was used to denote a reversed meaning: the viewpoint that it signifies the silencing of men’s voices by women.

Many instances of the original definitions are women narrating their best (or worst) experience of being mansplained to, where men explained things that they could not know more about due to their not being a woman, as in (15), or something the woman is an expert on (16):

- (15) My father has a tendency to tell me what women believe. He generalizes to a laughable degree and tells me, his Master’s educated feminist daughter – about women’s overall opinions and flaws. So, not only is he being sexist, but his “mansplaining” is inaccurate. (*red.m.5*)
- (16) I have a degree in biochemistry and I invented a new method for measuring lifespan in cells [...] In an invited tutorial session, one of the male students started to correct me and explain how to use the method. (*red.m.5*)

Others define the word with hypotheticals, describing situations in which mansplaining may occur, such as the *hyperbolic example* given in (17), or the perceived ways others, namely men, have caused a shift in what the word means (18), which responds to a user who provides the word’s origin, a definition, and an example¹³.

- (17) For a hyperbolic example [of mansplaining], something like “catcalling isn’t bad it’s a nice ego boost [...]” clearly ignoring the fact that women may feel uncomfortable about catcalling, and the person mansplaining cannot understand their experience. (*red.m.4*)
- (18) Yes, that is the original definition. But according to current usage "in the field", its usage has shifted to refer to any contradiction, polite or otherwise. (*red.m.5*)

The word is redefined by others, based on claims to epistemological evidence, for instance in (19) and (20), which parallel *mansplain* with linguistic policing based on their own linguistic ideologies of modern social discourses, they redefine the word as a problematic one for its ability to shut down others’ voices in the name of social justice:

- (19) [*Mansplain*] is a classic Kafka Trap¹⁴. Even if the phenomenon exists (and it likely does to some degree), the term itself is not a useful linguistic tool, but rather a rhetorical weapon. (*red.m.2*)
- (20) Mansplain is a sexist term used to silence men by gender-shaming them. that is what mansplaining is (*tum.m.7*)

¹³ The comment gives the background story of Rebecca Solnitt’s viral essay to which the word’s popularity is traced, and defines *mansplain* as “when a man condescendingly explains something to a woman that the woman actually has more knowledge of, such as what it feels like to be the victim of sexual harassment.”

¹⁴ “A kafkatrap is the action of accusing someone of some form of “ism” (sexism, racism, etc.) and to proclaim that their denial, or any attempt they make to defend themselves, is proof that they are guilty. A favorite tactic of the social justice warrior. *Your refusal to admit that you are a misogynist proves you’re a misogynist. Hey that’s kafkatrapping!*” (Bdelgmia, 2016).

Lastly, in users' production and consumption of *mansplain*, they are able to make alignments between certain types of people and different discursive actions, such as the act of mansplaining, and using the word *mansplain*. In (21), the first of two examples below, a Tumblr user (whose account biography suggests it belongs to a woman) reacts to another woman's narrative of a face-to-face conversation in which a man explained the field in which she has her PhD. Here, she adds to the notion that someone who mansplains is over-confident and oblivious that impressing a woman with his knowledge is inappropriate when the topic is her expertise:

(21) In other words, he's trying to show off his big dick in the hopes he'd get laid. what an idiot. (*tum.m.3*)

Conversely, in (22), a Twitter user whose account presents a male identity responds to a previous tweet in which a user identified as female tells him he has misunderstood what *mansplain* means and provides a definition for him. Her tweet leads him to position her as a certain type of person, i.e., a foolish individual who has bestowed upon themselves a delusional sense of entitlement, and a "social-justice warrior" or someone who allegedly pretends to fight for civil rights and uses false moral superiority as an excuse to be rude and aggressive to others.

(22) Give it a rest you self-entitled SJW twit. (*tw.m.4*)

Moving beyond the individual instances in which users offer their idea of what the word means, next I present a discernable pattern in how these disputes evolve. In the back-and-forth between SNS users on what *mansplain* means, macro-social significances of the conflicting viewpoints come to light. In disputes of what *mansplain* is actually doing in language and society, what occurs are constructions of logical arguments that are somewhat tautological in nature. In other words, the arguments are structured in such ways that the stated proposition is logically irrefutable, regardless of which point of view it projects, in part due to the obscuring of all available evidence and reasoning. That is, the statement "*mansplain* refers to the silencing of

voices, ideas, and experiences” is an assertion that may be true in every way it is interpreted. But whose voices are silenced? And what are the grounds for the ostensible silencing? In the unfolding of *mansplain* discourses, as users dispute the semantic values of the words, these questions are addressed.

A closer analysis of what is going on in each item is not the focus here; instead, I present how the micro-level disputes of the word’s meaning morph into the broader social implications of gendered imbalances. The next set of exemplars represent the main communicative moves in the overall discourse of what *mansplain* means, and how users argue for or against the associated semantic meaning. (To separate these items from the numbered examples presented elsewhere in this section, they are labeled (a) through (i).) There are three parts, moving from the micro to the macro. Starting at the micro-level, in the first stage, users employ the word to describe an experience of a man mansplaining to a woman:

- (a) My worst experiences with mansplaining involve men “educating” me about the truth surrounding catcalling, including my own experiences with it. (*red.m.3*)

Experiences like the one described in (a) are numerous; in fact, the other collected contexts from which example (a) came are more women sharing their mansplaining experiences. Facilitated by the existence of *mansplain*, stories like (a) are frequent enough to quickly and inevitably elicit responses from men. In men’s stories, more often than not, the neologism is depicted merely as a creative, but laughable and weak method for men to be silenced. In this stage, the semantic value of *mansplain* is broadened to include any given scope of speech from a man to a woman, such as in (b):

- (b) it is intellectually dishonest, lazy, and frankly insulting for women to disregard the opinions of men by playing the “mansplaining” card (*red.m.1*)

Now that both “sides” have voiced their opposing viewpoints of *mansplain* and the reality of the concept it describes, in the next stage, various arguments are made to offer

evidence for or against the validity of *mansplain*. Diverse strategies, demonstrated in (c) through (g), function as rebuttals against the evaluations in (a) and (b) by referencing other users' perspectives of *mansplain*. In (c), users viewing *mansplain* as a real and widespread reality call attention to the discrepancy between the original definition, and the allegedly misguided re-interpretation of *mansplain* put forth in (b), and they attempt to correct the deviation from the original meaning that they wish to preserve:

- (c) 1. Your interpretation of that [WOMEN ASKING MALE SUPERIORS TO HELP THEM IN THE WORKPLACE] having anything to do with mansplaining is questionable at best [REPLY TO TWEET IN EXAMPLE 6, ABOVE] (*tw.m.3*)
2. Mentoring is offering support and guidance which should be easy enough to do without a grope, most people manage. Mansplaining, though, is explaining in a patronizing way what you already know. (*tw.m.3*)

From the opposing viewpoint, users offer additional reasoning to support their resolute view that *mansplain* is an illegitimate term, represented initially in (b). As (d) shows, the claim that *mansplain* is sexist against men is often backed by the observation that women are frequently guilty of condescending explaining. Users allude to epistemic testimony to communicate their perspectives of gendered language:

- (d) 1. the irony is that using a term like mansplaining is actually incredibly arrogant and condescending. being a pretentious prick has nothing to do with gender. (*red.m.4*)
2. Things that don't need the word "man" in front of it:
- Mansplaining
 - Manterrupting
 - Manspreading
3. Women have explained things in condescending ways to men. Women have interrupted men before. Women have hogged up space in public transport [...] #ANTI-FEMINISM #FEMINISM #ANTI-MISANDRY (*tum.m.7*)

Another strategy in this stage is to mock the term *mansplain* by creating new gendered terms. The new terms re-direct the condescension and power of *mansplain* from men to women, discounting the unidirectional dynamic in *mansplain*'s original definition to highlight perceived

patterns in how women talk to men. Through lexical play, users create their own words to point out styles of language that are stereotypically associated with women. The lexical play and its belittlement of women function to communicate their disapproval of *mansplain* on the grounds that there are derisory linguistic habits associated with women. These words highlight some negative stereotypes of women, such as *an ovary action* (*red.m.2*), *hystericalectomy*¹⁵, *femotional* (*red.m.2*), and *cuntfusing the issue* (*red.m.2*), which allude to women being hormonal, overly emotional, or unnecessarily complicating a topic; or the image of a perpetually dissatisfied woman described in *womannagging* (*red.m.4*) and *womplaining* (*red.m.2*). Creating new gendered metapragmatic terms like these have a rhetorical purpose to discredit the necessity of *mansplain* with an argument that *mansplain* is pointless because, “men have to put up with annoying ways women talk, too.” However, because *mansplain* embodies issues deeply-entrenched in the language of a male-dominated society, this argument could only be justified in a world where gender inequality does not exist. As a result, significantly varying levels of awareness of and ideologies towards gender-based imbalances are observable here.

As a counter argument, other users thus support *mansplain* by pointing out how the power dynamics between men and women play a role in communicative imbalances:

- (e) 1. but it’s different because women don’t generally go off on a “let me explain things to you, sweetie” tangent like some guys do; it has to do with power (*tum.m.4*).
2. when men mansplain, they’re creating or enforcing a balance of power; a mansplainer only acts that way towards people he perceives as “inferior” (because of their gender, race, and/or social status). a mansplainer is 100% aware of his behavior since he wouldn’t even think about mansplaining someone who he thinks is superior to him. (*tum.m.6*)

Alluding to power dynamics rarely proves to be a successful strategy in convincing others who have previously not recognized the existence of power imbalances in gender (or

¹⁵ Bujarski (2019)

hegemonic relations more generally), and who have remained steadfast that arguments for equality are counterproductive if those viewpoints support terms that single out one group of people. Such an argument, a very common one, is represented in (f):

- (f) 1. Seems like if someone is being condescending we can call it just that. I don't get the need to bring in the gender of the offender (*tw.m.10*).
2. nothing like a sexist generalizing all men... I have a dream that sexist women will not try to silence men by gender shaming them with sexist buzzwords (*tum.m.5*)

In the collected materials, similar contentions as the one seen in (f) occur very frequently, with questions (*why use 'mansplain'*), admissions of not understanding (*I don't get why people don't just say 'condescending'*), and calls for change (*can we please stop saying mansplain. just say arrogant or rude and leave gender out of it*). Responses to that confusion are not in short supply, with a range of retorts from showing contempt for not understanding (e.g., in g1), to empathetic replies (e.g., g2). In these tweets/posts/comments, users attempt to explain how *mansplain* describes a wider social pattern, and that it is a gendered term for a reason, but that does not mean it is sexist. In these arguments, users often offer analogies to try to explain their point of view:

- (g) 1. I'm sorry but that is the dumbest argument [... it is] justified because it describes real trends of discrimination from one group towards another. if in this day and age, you refuse to believe that there are widespread trends of men oppressing and looking down on women, then I have no problem calling you sexist. (*red.m.1*)
2. The point of calling men 'mansplainer' is to cause controversy so this pattern of behavior can be discussed and eventually heavily reduced. Just calling the speaker condescending would not lead to broader discussion... Men can mansplain to other men, it is just more common with other women since rigid male gender norms showboating knowledge or ability to overlap with rigid gender norms of women... Touching upon the fact that it is impossible to know motive is exactly why the term mansplain is important. People are not good reporters of their own motive... Bringing attention to a pattern of behavior associated with sexism will cause men to self-examine their motives and possibly avoid being condescending in order to avoid "incorrectly" being labeled as sexist...(*red.m.1*)

3. Why fight for equality by using gender-encoded terms? Because it is a negative gender-encoded behavior and it absolutely should be pointed out AS A NEGATIVE. We call a murderer a murderer and a rapist a rapist. A sexist is a sexist, meaning they are prejudiced against someone for their sex. Pointing out a gender bias with a humorous term is not sexist. [...] “Mansplaining” points to the negative behavior and does not in any way deride the speaker. It merely elucidates the gender bias. (*tum.m.4*)
4. It’s the same as calling people out for racism when a white person calls a black person well-spoken. While there is a chance it is completely unrelated to race, the speaker would not be any more aware than the receiver of whether that is the case. Calling out the behavior is the only rational thing to do in order to challenge discrimination (*red.m.1*)

The four arguments in (g) show that many users still perceive *mansplain* to be a sexist term. Usually, at this point, once the communicative moves shown in (c) through (g) have transpired, many have abandoned the debate. However, some dialogues persist, and these metasemantic arguments lead to a third stage: debates of macro-level ideologies and mutual accusations of social injustice. On the one hand, *mansplain* represents the view of feminism as a widespread social problem, citing its alleged self-driven lapse into a ridiculous movement aiming to erase all recognizable social customs related to gender and sex:

- (h) 1. I fucking hate that men are demonized in today’s culture. feminism is no longer feminism... I believe in EQUALITY FOR WOMEN... so by definition, if a man can “mansplain” I think a woman can “womansplain”, that’s equality right? the whole thing feminists are fighting for is superiority. (*tum.m.1*)
2. ironic how you feminists fight sexism but you’re all sexist yourself (*tum.m.5*)

On the other hand, the redefining of *mansplain* is seen by others to be yet another example of how men denigrate and subjugate women, suppressing their social standing by stifling their voices. But at this macro-level stage, users must respond to the sorts of charges seen in (h), essentially repeating many of the points previously made. Hence, the debate on the larger effects of the word *mansplain* and what the term is seen to represent may continue, as exemplified in (i):

- (i) feminism doesn't deny that women do these things. feminism points out the problem that when a woman does these things, she's being a bitch. but when a man does them, he's just being a man. feminism is about systemic issues, not about individual actions. (tum.m.7)

As we can see, the clashes in what *mansplain* means can often and easily morph into ideological disputes about the behaviors of men and women, about the boundaries of sexism, and the macro-level implications of what feminism is or is not doing for men and women. The conflicting meanings of the word does not render it powerless. In fact, the pervasive quarrels about its semantic value may boost its rhetorical influence since using the word entails a certain viewpoint of gendered power dynamics, which in turn presupposes that viewpoint as indisputable. As users continually reflect on gendered language, they react to their own position on the issue, and are exposed to other's image of their position on the sociolinguistic landscape.

This section has explored how the semantic value of *mansplain* is related to the various concerns and shared understandings of what is true about gendered communication, and how those realities are situated in the world. The polarized discourses made possible by *mansplain* may on the surface seem silly or even a self-serving tool to insult others, but they are necessary to understand the language and behaviors to understand how gender-related issues fit into the socio-ideological consciousness.

RQ1c and RQ1d – Pragmatic functions and metapragmatic strategies in *mansplain*. So far, the analysis of *mansplain* has focused on the meta-level and semantic values that emerge. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it was not practical to code and count pragmatic functions and metapragmatic strategies in a way that could meaningfully be presented in a table, since even very short texts can perform numerous and overlapping functions to create meaning in countless ways. As a result, to address RQ1c and RQ1d, I first briefly present some specific strategies in *mansplain* discourses. I then take a closer look at how users communicate their

viewpoints through various pragmatic functions and metapragmatic aspects, as well as how users' abilities to interpret and discuss language help them to reflect upon and share their viewpoints of the word and its wider social significance.

Because *splain* words describe language, the most frequent strategies for users to call attention to that language depends on the context in which the mansplaining occurred. Users observing mansplaining online typically take a screenshot and share it as an image, such as in examples (22) and (23) below. But if the language of focus was not recorded in some way, such as a spontaneous instance in spoken language, users re-animate it through reported speech, either directly with a quotation: e.g., *he actually said at one point "women just talk loads and say nothing" (tum.m.5)*; or indirectly: e.g., *I'm literally typing this as a man is mansplaining to me on how bees sting [...] (tum.m.2)*. Calling attention to patterns in language is also frequently done by creating hypothetical speech, e.g., *'Sweetie you have a vagina, not a brain, let me tell you how things ACTUALLY work'. (tum.m.4)*; or making a prediction about imminent mansplaining: *waiting for someone to come and inevitably mansplain this tweet (tw.m.3)*. Besides methods for calling attention to language, users also employ a range of devices to communicate their own evaluation by making written allusions to paralanguage, such as employing emojis, hashtags, or orthographic manipulation to convey tone of voice or facial expressions. For example, in this tweet, the user employs capitalization to emphasize words, multiple exclamation points to convey excitement, and two emojis to communicate emotions and consequent facial reactions and nonverbal cues like laughing: *Yes! I looked at his profile and he is seriously upset about the response to his tweet!! He would DEFINITELY NEVER listen!*

  (tw.m.2).

All of the methods listed above show that users identify a sample of language to represent *mansplaining*, and in a variety of ways, call attention to it or recontextualize it with their added commentary. A closer analysis of the two exemplars below are presented to illustrate how users' metapragmatic skills allow for the creative manipulation of pragmatic meaning and platform affordances to discuss male-female communication.

The first exemplar (22) is tweet by @USERY – whose account presents a male identity. @USERY comments on a Twitter conversation between other users, which he shares as a screenshot. His multimodal tweet includes an attached screenshot (profile pictures, usernames, and handles have been blacked out for this document and marked as @MALE1, @FEMALE, and @MALE2, corresponding to the gender identity presented by their accounts). The Twitter dialogue, recontextualized as an image in a new tweet, shows a portion of dialogue between a woman and two male users on women's actions after sexual assault:

(22) @USERY: im fucking dead. its over. bye



@USERX: [REPLYING TO @USERY] That's right up there with the time a man explained to me I was not using the term mansplain correctly #COULDNTMAKETHISSHITUP #MANSPLAIN (tw.m.1)

In the original tweet by @USERY, the word *mansplain* is not used, although, through @USERY's employment of pragmatic functions, i.e., a valediction and report of his own death, he severely inflates the metaphor of having laughed so hard he died. He expresses his evaluation of @MALE2's comment as deserving of ridicule by conveying uncontrollable laughter. His reaction of figuratively laughing to death, though, also implies an incredulity of the tweet by @MALE2. Much like the satire of television and media that helps us identify and work through uncomfortable issues in society through comedy, in (22), @USERY's use of humor by way of exaggerated laughter might be a strategy that allows him to more easily contend with his exasperation against @MALE2.

In @USERX's reply, she communicates an agreement, a shared incredulity with @USERY, comparing the dialogue in his post to her own story of a man correcting her usage of *mansplain*. In stating that the exchange in the screenshot is "right up there with" her experience, she not only points out a common theme of men disregarding what women are saying, but her tweet portrays both exchanges to be "up there" in rank, as paragons in the genre of male-to-female linguistic belittlement. And that type of language is further clarified by the meta³pragmatic layers included in her story, reporting that some men are not only over-confident enough to mansplain, but to mansplain to women about *mansplain*. As an additional metapragmatic strategy, she includes #*mansplain*, providing a direct evaluation of the language by making the word point to itself. Alongside the hashtag "couldn't make this shit up," an expression said in response to disbelief, both hashtags serve to comment on the absurdity in her own story and the speech on display in the tweet.

The next example (23) is from a post on Reddit, which also takes a multimodal approach to display a sample of language in the form of an image (Figure 17). This time, the depicted

dialogue originates from the offline world – albeit a fictional one. It is an excerpt from a scene on the television comedy, *Silicon Valley*, a scene that mentions the gender imbalance and toxic male culture in the field of information technology. In the scene, the notion of what *mansplaining* describes is exemplified by a man explaining to two women what *mansplain* is. The dialogue cleverly leads the viewer to a meta³pragmatic awareness by presenting *mansplain* and mansplaining language in action. The man ignores the women’s statement, *We know what mansplaining is*, which exemplifies that he intended for his speech to be a monologue (or a “manalogue”). That is, he continues speaking, seemingly unaware of the women’s response to his question, “Have you heard about [mansplaining]?” in order to continue his explanation, thus providing a clear demonstration for the viewers that he is mansplaining *mansplain*.



Figure 16: Screen capture of scene from *Silicon Valley* posted in the subreddit r/funny

The comments in (23) are among the most “upvoted” comments by other redditors, showing the most liked and agreed upon insights of the users that follow the r/funny subreddit, a

subreddit that has no specific target audience and nearly 23 million subscribers. Despite the Reddit post's humorously instructive illustration of *mansplain*, the users' replies to the post reveal a collective disregard for the word's meaning, subsequently rejecting the existence of the language *mansplain* describes:

(23) ↕ RED: womansplaining is when a woman will passionately explain something to a man that he doesn't already care about.

 ↕ REPLY 1: Or when she explains it multiple times over the course of an hour...

 ↕ REPLY 2: Over, and over, and over... (*red.m.4*)

The first comment by RED applies a reverse definition by way of *womansplain*, which has two results: first, appropriating *mansplain* and re-affixing it with *woman-* shows metapragmatic understanding – with an opposing viewpoint – of *mansplain* and the issues that the word exemplifies. Secondly, it communicates the user's stance towards the gendered aspect of *mansplain*, a strategy that renders *mansplain* meaningless, at least in his comment. That is, *womansplain* diminishes the function of *mansplain*; the idea that men and women can both be accused of the same linguistic offense neutralizes the conjectures that only men are guilty of it. The redditor uses a stereotypical complaint from men – that women are emotional – describing the woman's explanation as “passionate.” He also intertextually parallels the syntax of his definition to that of *mansplain* in the original post (“that she already knows”) with *that he doesn't already care about*. Out of context, the clause *that he doesn't already care about* sounds awkward, since *care* is a stative verb that would not normally be accompanied with time adverbs like *already*. But within its context, the unusual structure is used deliberately, its clumsiness helping to signify what the comment means to do: to mock the notion of *mansplain*.

Womansplain therefore serves as a linguistic tool for retaliation, challenging the foundations of the issue at hand.

Concluding remarks. This section has shown that the word *mansplain* is a provocative subject in SNS. Disputes over what it means and how people – especially women – use the word, unfold in numerous manners with a range of creative strategies of meaning-making involving multimodality and metalinguistic skills. I have shown how regardless of the attitude users have towards the word, arguments are postulated on assumptions about differences in male-to-female communicative dynamics. For many, *mansplain* is a useful tool for women to label a common reality by which they have long been frustrated, and powerful in its capacity to make visible and potentially diminish everyday sexist language behaviors. For others, though, namely men, the word incites strong adverse reactions. The most common way that users react to the feelings of being victimized or censored by the word, was through metapragmatic wordplay that reversed the communicative male-to-female direction of *mansplain* by: recontextualizing *mansplain* to signify a silencing a men’s voices, appropriating the word and re-affixing *woman-*, or creating new gendered words that pejoratively comment on the language of women. The retaliation of mostly men against *mansplain* paradoxically supports the view that male hegemony does exist in language. The male users’ retaliation brought up the numerous negative stereotypes for women’s communication such as nagging or being hysterical. Yet *mansplain* confronts one stereotypical way that men talk to women, and the overall response is saturated with agitation.

The discourses discussed in this section show some of the ways that *mansplain* is displayed as an object of metacommentary, prompting users to reflect on the relationship between language and gender. Through their interactions, social media users employ a range of methods to argue for or against various attitudes about what *mansplain* means, about the people

who use it, and, in turn, their ideologies regarding gender differences in society. As shown above, through personal stories, users draw on epistemic stances to justify their beliefs. Additionally, these discussions are often constructed as humorous ones through linguistic practices like sarcasm, exaggeration, and wordplay. The lighthearted tone of most *mansplain* discourse suggests that perhaps the amusement evoked by a silly neologism may facilitate reflective conversations on contentious social conflicts regarding gender equality. In addressing RQ1b, it was shown how shared assumptions of language and gender allow the various usages of *mansplain* to carry social valence.

Overall, the analyses above have provided insight on perspectives of gendered language that underlie the social implications of language use, and how communicating disapproval of the word, pretending to mansplain, accusing someone of it, or laughing, frowning, or shaking their heads at it, these acts become consequential actions by which users position themselves in society. In other words, studying the work that citizen sociolinguists are doing helps understand the significance of the debate over the word's meaning and legitimacy.

Whitesplain

This section analyses the discourses around *whitesplain* from 212 collected texts and co-texts. When SNS users employ the word *whitesplain*, they are calling attention to language coming from a racially-privileged speaker and addressed to a racially-marked person or group of people. The language is viewed as condescending and often inaccurate speech about race, ethnicity, and the experiences of racial minorities. In the *whitesplain* collected material, the majority of discourse surrounding the word involves afflictions of African-American communities. Understandably, though, the history of White hegemony is not limited to the oppression of African-Americans in the United States, and this fact is mirrored in the broad

range of global ethnocultural concerns that also surface in *whitesplain* discourse. Other issues remarked upon in the data include: religious practices of Muslim women; historical and ongoing atrocities against Native Americans; post-Brexit xenophobia in the U.K.; immigration and citizenship in the U.S.; the implications of U.S. politicians using Spanish in public speeches; mainstream media's roles in perpetuating racial inequality through stereotyping; the fetishization of Asian women by American men; and the underrepresentation of Asian-Americans and other ethnic minorities in Hollywood, alongside casting White actors for roles of non-White characters. After some background of the study of language and ethnicity, and some crucial benchmarks in the scholarship on defining race and racism, I present selections from the collected material that demonstrate more specific examples of how these discourses develop.

Defining race. Language and ethnicity research has been motivated by a number of concerns, including but not limited to: dialectal differences, e.g., the phonetics, phonology, syntax, stylistics, etc. of African-American English (e.g., Green, 2002); code-switching between languages/dialects (e.g., Lo, 1999); the role of schools' devaluing or supporting minority dialects or languages, and the social stigmatization of minority languages and dialects (e.g., Blackledge & Creese, 2010); the effects when stigmatized varieties carry prestige for speakers (e.g., Green, 2002), such as "Talking Hip-Hop" (Magro, 2016); and who are authentic speakers of ethnolinguistic varieties (e.g., Holliday, 2018).

In sociological theory, the idea of race comprises the belief that a biological division of groups based on physical and cultural traits is a socially constructed one (Haas, 2012). The modern view of race cannot be divorced from the notions of White or European superiority established during the age of imperialism. Instead, as Haas explains, race is a rhetorical construct, but "it is real in its effects. It is a real lived, social, political, embodied experience that

affects everyone, directly or indirectly, on an everyday basis” (p. 282). In critical race theory, race is understood to be subjective of and influenced by other intersecting identities such as gender, class, sexuality, ability, religion, and nationality (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Kendall, 1995).

The notion of race is undoubtedly a complex one, and its complexity is mirrored in the diversity of topics in which the word *whitesplain* appears. Given the sociological and sociolinguistic understanding of race and racism, and given the fact that “white” is in the word of focus, in this section, I use the terms “White” and “POC” (person/people of color) to discuss the ways different groups talk to and about one another, except in the cases in which users identify a more specific racial/ethnic identifier: *Black, native Americans, DREAMers, Europeans, Jews, Arab Muslims, or Asians*. As in the rest of this study, I present the data exactly as it appeared on the SNS.

One more point that should be noted is that while slurs against any group can be incredibly offensive, the “N-word” is one that carries a heavier consequence than others in the U.S.’s current sociopolitical climate where the majority of events surrounding racial tensions involving the Black community – the group that has been maligned for centuries by White people’s use of the epithet. Usage of the N-word has been popularized, largely by rap and hip-hop music, and reappropriated by Black speakers, used in a manner that is not derogatory but to mean *friend* or show in-group solidarity or affection. In this usage, it is usually pronounced in AAE without rhoticity and usually represented the same way in writing. As a White feminist, I am aware of the highly-offensive impacts of its use by speakers that are not part of the Black community, and in my own references to the word, I refer to it euphemistically as “the N-word.”

However, as a discourse analyst, I do not believe in censoring the language under analysis, and so when the word is used in the data I present below, it is written how the user wrote it.

RQ1a – Meta-level of *whitesplain* usages. In the subset of *whitesplain* discourse of 212 collected texts and co-texts, the word appears 45 times. The items in the first meta-level are reserved for discussing RQ1b, c, and d. The examples in this section focus on when the word is used at the meta² or meta³ levels, specifically how discussions of the word *whitesplain* illuminate users’ views of how language relates to race-related issues. In turn, these metapragmatic discussions illuminate various social ideologies towards race, racism, and White hegemony, as well as the ongoing changes observed in racial tensions, and in how race and racism are discussed. Table 5 shows the distribution of how *whitesplain* is used across the three platforms:

Table 5: *Meta-level of uses across platforms – RQ1a for whitesplain*

Meta-level WHITE	1			2			3		
	texts	co-texts	total	texts	co-texts	total	texts	co-texts	total
Twitter	9	2	11	1	2	3	2	0	2
Reddit	4	4	8	0	4	4	1	1	2
Tumblr	6	1	7	1	7	8	0	0	0
Total	19	7	26	2	13	15	3	1	4

Based on the table, 26 (58%) uses of the word use it in context, and in 15 (33%) it is used metasemantically. Compared to *mansplain* (used in context 50% of the time (N=27) and talked about 41% of the time (N=22)), the usages of *whitesplain* differ to some extent; namely, *mansplain* is the object of discussion more often than *whitesplain* is, and *whitesplain* occurs more often as a content word in the posts. However, the previous section on *mansplain* noted that there were no instances that suggested a user had just learned about *mansplain*, and the higher percentage of texts at the meta² level disputed the term’s semantic value. While we cannot know

the behind-the-scenes – for instance, users could have seen *mansplain* and looked it up before commenting – in the *whitesplain* data, over a third of the time, the meta² usage was not to dispute the term’s meaning, instead, reactions to *whitesplain* seem to express surprise, confusion, or delight, suggesting they have just learned about it. For example:

- (1) TIL [TODAY I LEARNED] there is something called whitesplain (*red.w.4*)
- (2) What’s whitesplain???? (*red.w.4*)
- (3) what the hell is whitesplaining (*tw.w.1*)
- (4) reblogging simply for the fact that the word “whitesplain” is now a thing (*tum.w.4*)
- (5) “Whitesplain” is my new favorite word ugHHH (*tw.w.4*)
- (6) whitesplain is probably the best most accurate word I have ever heard, thank you so much (*tw.w.4*)

The first three comments above directly address the novelty of the word for the user, especially the acronym in (1) for *today I learned*, and the direct request for explanations of it in (2) and (3). In (4) and (5), statements of newness – *is now a thing*, *new favorite word* – suggest that previously for these users, *whitesplain* was unknown. In (4), by giving thanks, the user is expressing gratitude to the original poster for providing them with a word that describes something they had previously been unable to label. This finding, especially when compared to the lack of such reactions to *mansplain*, supports the argument that *mansplain* was the first neologism and inspired the coinage of the other splains.

In other meta² usages, various other reactions to *whitesplain* show up in the data. Examples (7) and (8) both put the word *whitesplain* in quotation marks and express uncontrollable laughter, as expressed in the acronym *LMAO* (“laughing my ass off”). The decision to put the word in quotes communicates that their laughter is directed at the word itself,

not the content of the post, suggesting the users are amused by the word, perhaps for the first time, like the commenters in the other co-texts from (*tum.w.4*) seen in (5) and (6).

(7) “whitesplain” *howls and falls off office chair* (*tum.w.4*)

(8) Lmao “whitesplain” (*tum.w.4*)

Examples (9) and (10), which both come from a post on r/Politics with 4.8 million subscribers, express disdain for its usage. In (9), the user identifies himself as a *fairly liberal minded person*, suggesting that a liberally-minded person might normally embrace the usage of neologisms, but for this user, *whitesplain* goes too far, as he equates it with *garbage* and *crap*:

(9) I would classify myself as a fairly liberal minded person, but holy fuck has Huff Post turned into such garbage. Whitesplained? GTFO [GET THE FUCK OUT] here with this crap. (*red.w.1*)

(10) Anyone who uses “whitesplain” seriously have no intention of mending racial tensions in America (*red.w.1*)

In (10), the user’s comment is somewhat ambiguous; the placement of the adverb *seriously* could mean “anyone who uses *whitesplain* in a serious manner” or “anyone who uses *whitesplain*, must seriously have no intention of mending racial tensions.” Nonetheless, the user’s sentiments towards the word’s usage, at least by a major newspaper, are no doubt negative. While (10) does not directly describe his political leanings like (9), the username includes MAGA, the acronym for Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” suggesting this user would not be an enthusiast of a liberal newspaper like *The Huffington Post*. I bring up this point because with *whitesplain*, as well as observations in the section on *mansplain*, there appears to be a discernable liaison between attitudes towards *splain* words, and party-based political convictions. Those with more conservative views are more likely to have complaints and fears towards the increasingly prominent movements for racial and gender equality. While there is no shortage of users who overtly disparage *mansplain*,

whitesplain, and specific social movements like feminism, #metoo, or #BlackLivesMatter, there are some users who are careful to express their viewpoints more implicitly. That is, rather than directly addressing the sensitive issues of race and racism (or gender and sexism), they justify their stance against progressive sociopolitical discourses by instead attacking “made-up words,” thus protecting themselves from the potential social and institutional consequences of being labeled a racist or sexist. Contextualizing “made-up words” as feeble mechanisms of those with opposing viewpoints, these users validate their beliefs without having to engage in a discussion on core social issues invoked by *whitesplain* (and *mansplain*).

The examples above have shown how users’ meta²pragmatic usages of *whitesplain* reveal that for some, the word is quite new, and that for many, it is an amusing term, useful for describing ways that White people speak to POC. Using the word to refer to feeling invisible and unheard actually allows new ways for POC voices to be heard and become more visible. For other users, and similar to counter-*mansplain* arguments, *whitesplain* may be seen as a threat, to which they react by scoffing at the term, and calling it absurd. For many White users, such as those who claim that *whitesplain* negatively impacts race relations, *whitesplain* undoubtedly causes some discomfort. For some Whites, it no doubt compromises their faith in the durability of the status quo from which they have always benefitted; it embitters their complacency with the race relations to which they are accustomed. To claim that *whitesplain* is a detriment to racial tensions, then, is not only egocentric, but it is in itself an example of whitesplaining, since it ignores POC’s point of view, and makes the conversation about the White users’ distress caused by *whitesplain*. The next observation of note for RQ1a is the usages of *whitesplain* at the meta³level.

In (11), the Twitter user, whom I label as @JS, responds to a tweet that used the hashtag #whitesplain. The meta³pragmatic tweet is able to communicate not only what *whitesplain* means, but that it is indeed a real and common occurrence in language. She does so by pointing out an instance in which *whitesplain* is whitesplained by a White person. In other words, @JS shows a metapragmatic awareness of what is happening when White people whitesplain by observing the times that White speakers have tried to explain to non-Whites what is or is not racist, which simultaneously supports her claim that whitesplaining language is real (since she observed White people *whitesplaining*), and also a form of White hegemony in language (by her recognition of what *whitesplain* means):

(11) @JS: I especially like the ones who whitesplain why using the expression whitesplain is racist. At least I would if I enjoyed banging my head on a wall. (*tw.w.6*)

Additionally, she clarifies what she means by *I especially like* in her follow up statement, *At least I would [like the ones who whitesplain whitesplain] if I enjoyed banging my head on a wall*. Here, she makes a comparison of her “liking” White people’s multiple layers of privileged explaining to having the same desire to voluntarily and repeatedly thrust her skull against a wall. Essentially, she draws on humor and sarcasm to clarify her frustration about whitesplaining and the refusal of others to recognize whitesplaining, as well as her point that racist discourse in general, as an actual phenomenon.

Example (12) from Reddit also illustrates meta³level language, but it is a unique example of this type of discourse, as it is the only one in all of the *splain* data that uses the word as a verb and talks about the word to express a negative evaluation of *whitesplain*, at least in a particular context:

(12) Much of what I could find existing talking about La La land and race has mainly focused on how Ryan Goslin “whitesplains” Jazz, which, while perhaps technically accurate, I think is also an unhelpful label. (*red.w.3*)

The Reddit user employs *whitesplain* as a quote, to reference other sources that discussed the issue of race in conjunction with jazz music and the film *La La Land*. The redditor says the claim that the movie whitesplains is *perhaps technically accurate*, demonstrating an agreement that whitesplaining exists. Then the comment refers to the word metasemantically as *an unhelpful label*. The discussion that unfolds concentrates on the shared perspective between the other users that *whitesplain* is a term that should be reserved for pointing out language that has more serious consequences on race-related discourse. Using it, then, to discuss the topic of a film about jazz music *takes away from other conversations* on more crucial race-based problems in language norms. Her usage of *whitesplain* in the metasemantic sense, as well as using it ironically in context, makes simultaneous use of language's components as a code and as a message – that is, as an object of language and a tool of communication – to convey the perceived realities of how race should or should not be talked about. In sum, example (12), like the other meta³pragmatic items discussed above and in the *Mansplain* section all demonstrate how users' linguistic reflexivity and manipulation of metapragmatic words creates new meanings and draw other users' attention to what *whitesplain* language looks like and how it happens.

RQ1b – Semantic values expressed via *whitesplain*. Identifying and categorizing the various semantic meanings ascribed by users to *whitesplain*, four categories emerged, the two main ones: *original* – when a racially/ethnically-privileged person explains a race-related issue or experience to a racially/ethnically-marked person in an inaccurate, oversimplified, or overconfident manner; and *reversed* – the view that the word is harmful for its ability to hurt race relations, or that it is racist for making claims of all white people. Table 6 shows the division of the four categories across each SNS platform:

Table 6: Identification and distribution of whitesplain semantic values across SNS

Whitesplain semantic meaning	Original	Not uni-directional ¹⁶	Reverse unproductive, racist word	Unknown
	Condescending explanation from a White person to a POC	Something White people can do, too, (other Whites)	An illegitimate term, only a linguistic weapon used against White people	Unclear how the user would define it
Twitter	56.3%	6.3%	31.3%	6.3%
Reddit	40.0%	0.0%	53.3%	6.7%
Tumblr	71.4%	0.0%	14.3%	14.3%
Total	55.6%	2%	36%	9%

The table shows that the majority of the time, especially on Twitter and Tumblr, the original sense of the word was communicated in the usage. Over a third of the time, though, namely on Reddit, the word was used in the reverse sense in which users alluded to its being problematic, dangerous, or even racist. All three examples below come from Tumblr and use *whitesplain* in a way that communicates the original definition.

In (13), it is used in as an adjective and a verb; it describes the user’s boss – *my whitesplaining boss* – and describes his communicative actions: *whitesplaining to me*. The comment aligns the meaning of *whitesplain* with explanations from White people about their using the N-word. The user continues the short narrative, stating she *shut him down with [her] personal commentary*. Although she provides no details of what she said to him, she reports that the exchange resulted in his agreeing with her; he came to acknowledge that as a White man, his

¹⁶ The only usage that I categorized as “not uni-directional” was an Irish man who accused someone of whitesplaining to him, claiming his race is Irish, not White. Other commenters expressed incredulity that he would not claim he was White. He was accused of being an internet troll and his account has since been banned by Twitter. His usage of *whitesplain* did not lead to noteworthy discussions of the word, nor of race in general. Consequently, I focus strictly on the *original* and *reverse* categories in this section.

usage of the N-word was problematic, and that he was wrong to assume that it was justified by Whites getting called *cracker*.

- (13) Good lord I spent an hour last night with my whitesplaining boss whitesplaining to me why if we say cracker he can say the n word. I let him go on then I shut him down with my personal commentary and he was like “oh... yeah okay that makes sense” (*tum.w.4*)

In (13), the user’s narrative references her boss, described by the user to be White, indexing a White character who whitesplains because he failed to understand – nor ever tried to understand – the perspective of POC on the issue. His agreement, *okay that makes sense*, implies he was oblivious of the pragmatic implications of his saying the N-word. It is unlikely that he intended for the word to be malicious or prejudiced; in fact, he may have thought it would have a positive effect on his identity. Regardless, the comment indicates that he had never been affected by the sociopragmatic consequence of such language use and the situated nature of the word in American culture. In other words, the story illustrates one of the notions of “White privilege”; that is, that there are advantages to having white skin that White people are not even conscious of because they have never needed to be. In the end, the comment tells of a real-world conversation in which a discussion about race and language was constructive.

Next, in (14), the original text retweets someone else’s language that occurred elsewhere on Twitter, resituating it on their own Twitter feed with their own added commentary. The language of focus comes from a tweet belonging to a user whose username and picture presents as a White woman (@WH). Her tweet is a contribution to conversation on whether a White person has appropriate authority to be the speaker at an event celebrating Black History. In the original post, the user’s tweet says only *lol*, very concisely framing @WH’s tweet as amusing. His tweet is very short and simple, with no capitalization, punctuation, or any additional explanation. His metacommentary on her tweet, then, is communicated more through what he

does not say. The absence of any text other than *lol* suggests the type of language is so habitual and run-of-the-mill that it needs no explanation.

(14) @Tw1: lol

@WH: It's unfair to say people wouldnt rather hear about black history month from someone who isn't black I believe most people respect Coach Popovich and that's why theyre willing to listen to his opinion It doesnt matter what color your skin is when speaking about history #equality

@Tw2: Tagging her tweet with #equality makes it all the more funny

@Tw3: The ultimate #Whitesplain (*white.tw.3*)

Two more users add meta-commentary on her language, further restructuring it as an example of problematic ways White people talk about race. @Tw2's comment builds upon @Tw1's ridicule of the White woman's language by pointing out her use of hashtag *#equality*, that *it makes it all the more funny*. His metalinguistic remark derides her and her language by laughing at what she said. His tweet rejects her definition of equality and reframes her *#equality*-tagged tweets as language that is in fact not about equality. Lastly, @Tw3 notices the sociopragmatic commentary happening in these tweets and labels it as an instantiation of *whitesplain*. In other words, @Tw3 is being a citizen sociolinguist, recognizing a pattern in the relationship between race and language, and adds the White woman's tweet to the catalogue of *#whitesplain* as *the ultimate* or prototypical exemplar.

In (15) and (16), the users only included the word *whitesplain* in the hashtags; however, both express frustrations of how White people speak to POC about the realities of racism and the experiences that only POC could have epistemic access to. Both examples are original posts on Tumblr (as opposed to (13) which was a comment left in response to a blog post). In (14), the author's use of *you* makes it clear that the blog is directed towards a specific addressee; although, it is unknown who that person is, other than their being White, as evidenced in the indirect

reported speech, *you said so yourself—you're white*. The user labels the White blogger's post as an example of whitesplaining by directly referencing the use of a tag, *intracommunity*, and quoting the other blogger, "*if you have anything like evidence [...] I'm all eyes!*" Furthermore, the user equates accepting POC reactions to racism with being *a decent human being*, pointing out the simplicity of POC requests that White people to stop talking and just listen. In sum, (15) and (16) show not only *whitesplain* expressing the original definition, but how the problem of whitesplaining is situated in more macro-level discourses .

- (15) Hey so, you said it yourself – you're white. You have literally NO business whatsoever in intracommunity discussions like these. You even tagged it as "intracommunity" so that should show you right there to step off. "if you have anything like evidence or articles about 'taking opportunities away from diasporic Asians' I'm all eyes!" get the fuck out. We do not need to spend our precious time giving you ~evidence~ of our experience with racism. #INTRACOMMUNITY DISCUSSION #SUBMISSION #ANTI ASIAN RACISM #WHITE PRIVILEGE #WHITESPLAINING #ENGLISH LANGUAGE #IMPERIALISM #MILITARISM #MOD NJ #GIF - #PROFANITY (*tum.w.5*)
- (16) a little bugged at white friends that police how PoC react to racist comments and demand that they educate them (because PoC's feelings/anger aren't constructive to teaching the racist person how to be a decent human being) #personal #post #racism #whitesplaining (*tum.w.3*)

Both (15) and (16) communicate a frustration towards White people's failure to listen, as well as frustration at the notion that POC are expected to spend the time and emotional labor of debating what is or is not racist. Specifically, (15) explains why the White blogger's demand for evidence of discrimination against Asian-Americans was problematic, stating *We do not need to spend our precious time giving you ~evidence~ of our experience with racism*. The use of *we/our* in contrast to *you* here illustrates a dichotomy between POC and Whites, specifically POC who describe experiences of racial discrimination, and obviously privileged Whites who doubt and contradict POC's lived experiences. In (16), the user's sarcastic statement, *because PoC's feelings/anger aren't constructive to teaching the racist person how to be a decent human being*,

implies that the expressed emotions of POC should be enough for *the racist person* to believe them. Furthermore, the user equates accepting POC reactions to racism with being *a decent human being*, pointing out the simplicity of POC requests that White people to stop talking and simply listen. In sum, (15) and (16) illustrate not only *whitesplain* expressing the original definition, but also situate the problem of whitesplaining in more macro-level discourses. That is, tagging their posts with *#whitesplaining* communicates how White people's language about race can easily hinder productive dialogues and the progression of empathetic understanding between different racial and ethnic groups.

The next three examples communicate a reversed definition of *whitesplain*. Like the reversed meaning of *mansplain*, which transfers the victimhood of verbal repression away from women to men, *whitesplain* has also been redefined to signify the sense that the voices of White speakers are the ones that are wrongfully silenced. Additionally, using the term to refer to POC language thus transfers the accusations of bigotry from the White speaker to the POC. Assertions that one is exposed to forms of discrimination based strictly on being White are examples of "reverse racism," a concept synonymous with an anti-White agenda (Pincus, 2003). In examples (17) and (18), the users denounce the word as racist, as *dismissive of an entire race [i.e., the entire White race]*; and those who use the term are *only showing your own bigotry*:

- (17) "Whitesplaining" similar to "Mansplaining" a term used to shame men or white people into submission instead of allowing them to speak and responding with a counter argument usually because you have no counter argument. Using such terms unironically only shows your own bigotry. (*tum.w.7*)
- (18) I find your use of the word "whitesplain" to be incredibly counterproductive to a constructive and good-natured discussion about race. Not only is it dismissive of an entire race, it is also inherently racist in itself. (*red.w.3.*)

The user in (17) claims that *whitesplain*, like *mansplain*, is merely a linguistic strategy for POC to make White people feel undue shame. The user makes the argument that by faulting

White people for whitesplaining can, by and by, work to silence the voices of Whites, a group of folks who are blameless of racism based on the fact that they cannot help having been born into the majority group. Thus, according to this user, *whitesplain* is only a term that POCs can use when they have no counterargument in a debate with a White person on race-related issues. These users equate the use of *whitesplain* with the notion of “playing the race card,” a rhetorical strategy to exploit one’s membership in a racial-minority group, appeal to anti-racist sentiments, and/or falsely accuse a speaker of racism when race is ostensibly irrelevant in the conversation. In this view, the use of *whitesplain* is seen by some to be like cheating in a contest, as an abuse of interlocutors’ racial differences to unfairly “win” the argument. In (18), the user criticizes the word as a hindrance to productive race-related discussions, due to the claim that it generalizes all White people; therefore, it is synonymous with an anti-White agenda and is racist itself. An interesting observation here, though, is that a possible result of redefining *whitesplain* in this way is rendering *whitesplain* a sort of paradoxical performative verb, (verbs like *promise* or *resign*, whose actions are achieved strictly through usage of the verb.) That is, contrarily redefining the word as a discriminatory tool against Whites therefore ensures that simply uttering the word effectively carries out the original meaning of *whitesplain*.

Lastly, example (19) demonstrates that the word *whitesplain* and disputes of its meaning occur in SNS discourses addressing racial tensions beyond those of the U.S. The conversation that precipitated the two tweets by @FS was a discussion on an apparent link between Brexit¹⁷ and an increase in reports of racism manifesting in the United Kingdom, namely against migrants from Arab and/or Muslim countries. The original tweet addressed the comments of a White

¹⁷ Brexit is a portmanteau of *British* and *exit* and refers to the forthcoming withdrawal of the U.K. from the European Union, following a referendum for which favor was expressed by 51.9% of the U.K. citizens who participated in the vote (71.8%) on June 23, 2016 (Hunt & Wheeler, 2019).

British television news presenter made to an activist, @FS, when she went on air with the news presenter to discuss the boost in overt racism during and after the Brexit vote. In the tweet, @FS says, *it's obvious what he was insinuating – that racist & xenophobic attack's post Brexit weren't really real. When I pulled him up on it after he straight up denied the post Brexit surge in attacks #whitesplaining*. In the subsequent replies, several users accuse @FS of being racist herself for labeling his language as whitesplaining, e.g., *you've sadly undermined your own message by using a hashtag that is basically racist*. In response to the accusations and redefining of *whitesplain* as racist against Whites, she first tweets a link to a definition of *whitesplain* in *Urban Dictionary*¹⁸. Next, standing by her usage of the word, she acknowledges the possible reason why some view *whitesplain* to be a racist term – *some here think [...] I'm saying all white people r racist*, noting that as a misinterpretation of the word's meaning and purpose in race-related dialogues:

(19) @FS: As for the term 'whitesplaining' being racist... 🙄 [LINK TO DEFINITION OF WHITESPLAINING ON *URBANDICTIONARY.COM*].

@FS: Some here think that by describing this situation as 'whitesplaining' i.e., a white person explaining what racism is to a person of colour, I'm saying all white people r racist or that they all also engage in this activity. That's not what the term implies.

At the surface level of semantic analysis, example (19) illustrates a common way that the semantic value of *whitesplain* is disputed on SNS and shows how easily a word that encompasses an entire group, such as a racial group, can be met with distrust. However, a closer look at these examples offer a glance at a much deeper discomfort that underlies discussions about race. The disputes of *whitesplain* in (19) exemplifies a wider trend in comments and posts

¹⁸ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=White-%27splaining> “The paternalistic lecture given by Whites toward a person of color defining what should and shouldn't be considered racist, while obliviously exhibiting their own racism.”

that dismiss *whitesplain*'s original meaning and that admonish those who use it, criticisms typically saturated with self-righteousness. Pretentiously scoffing at the word insinuates that those users are less than willing to critically consider what *whitesplaining* is, perhaps for fear of realizing they are guilty of verbal (micro)aggressions against POC, a fear that is mitigated by sanctimoniously dismissing the word. The fact that *white* is part of the word clearly causes emotional reactions from people feeling they are wrongfully grouped with whatever their image is of a "true" racist. They respond defensively to the perceived personal offense against them, effectively shifting the focus of the conversation away from POC's attempt to describe an experience, towards themselves and their own unquestionable innocence of racist language, justified by the condemnation of the word *whitesplain*.

What @FS is doing in (19) is also a type of language that many users identify as a frustrating result of White privilege. That is, in (19), @FS takes the time and energy to rationalize her use of *whitesplain* and defend the view that it is not racist. Consequently, the language in (19) is not just a debate on semantics, but it also demonstrates the task of educating White people, which the users in (15) and (16) speak about with frustration. Nakamura (2015) describes carrying out this kind of dialogue on SNS as "unwanted digital labor," an unseen, stigmatized, and treacherous job performed largely by "women of color... and racial minorities who call out, educate, protest, and design around toxic social environments in digital media" (p. 106). This digital labor is therefore another genre of language that *whitesplain* can also index, in which POC carry out this "unwanted digital labor."

In sum, in the SNS discussions surrounding uses of *whitesplain*, various ideas emerge regarding the meaning and larger social significance of the word. The stories of whitesplaining told by POC speak to the prevalence of the issue, and they disclose the diverse forms of

condescending language from White speakers to POC. Each story further shapes *whitesplain*'s denotation, widening the range of ways that White people are seen to patronizingly lecture POC on issues of race or racism, often seemingly presumptuous that the POC knows less about the topic. The act of whitesplaining often demonstrates an inappropriate perspective on racial inequality, a perspective from the group who has not experienced racism the same way POC have. As a result, instances of whitesplaining are understood as conversations about race in a way that positions the White speaker's experience as the focus. Centering the White perspective not only eclipses the voices of non-Whites, but it implies that the White perspective is the only valid one. This section also demonstrated how the word is redefined by some to reverse the communicative dynamics, switching the roles of racist-speaker and victim-of-racist-language. Both of these acts, 1) whitesplaining and 2) stating that *whitesplain* is racist, are seen by POC to shift the conversation about race to focus on the White perspective, requiring the additional work of further explanation.

This section has concentrated on meaning-making at the semantic level. The next subsection takes a look at what pragmatic and metapragmatic functions allow users to discuss race through *whitesplain*.

RQ1c and RQ1d – Pragmatic functions and metapragmatic strategies. To address RQ1c and RQ1d for *whitesplain*, I present a close analysis of the linguistic pragmatics and metapragmatic aspects of four exemplars in order to add to this section's discussion on the micro-level uses of *whitesplain* in digital discourse and the macro-social significance of the language.

The first example is a blog post from Tumblr referencing the use of the N-word by "pewdiepie," a White man from Sweden with a well-known YouTube channel, and the ensuing discussions on SNS between White and POC users. In (20), the user addresses the issue without

using *whitesplain* in the Tumblr post, but tagging the post with *#whitesplaining* and a tag that combines the words *take your whitesplaining to the nearest exit*:

(20) Yea I have a message for some of you white folks in regards to pewdiepie(or any white person- especially one in a place of power) using the N-word.

You. Don't. Get. To. Determine. What. Is. Or Isn't. Offensive. To. Black. Folks.
Thank you.

#TAKEYOURWHITESPLAININGTOTHENEARESTEXIT #WHITESPLAINING (tum.w.2)

The author makes use of orthographic features of writing and the speech act of giving thanks to express their message in the way they intend. The act of giving thanks punctuates the ending of the point, emphasizing that their point is straightforward and needs no further explanation, debate, or questioning. *Whitesplain* occurs twice in the hashtags: *#whitesplaining* serves to label White people's discussion of whether the N-word is racist as whitesplaining. The longer hashtag makes an intertextual reference to directions in travel such as *proceed to the nearest exit*, to command speakers of such language to stop talking and leave the conversation.

The use of punctuation also functions to convey the pragmatic meaning of her statement: *You. Don't. Get. To. Decide...* Making each word its own sentence evokes prosodic features of spoken language. The periods signify pauses between each word, giving the utterance a staccato quality. In this manner, the user is not only telling the whitesplaining audience "you don't get to decide..." but saying it in a way that portrays the listener as someone who needs the concept explained simply and clearly. This aspect shows her metapragmatic evaluation of her declaration: that this statement has been made repeatedly in the past, that it is a concept that should be (but is apparently not) widely-accepted, and so she repeats it in a way to show her exasperation. It positions the *whitesplainers* as a certain type of person who does not understand such a simple concept and positions herself as someone who is impatient with the persistence of *whitesplaining*.

The Tumblr post in (21) serves as a useful demonstration of users' creativity with intertextuality, multimodality, and cultural references to communicate an evaluation of language. The post begins in stating, *White people trying to whitesplain to me why it's ok for them to use the n-word*, followed by two images. The post's multimodal components draw from a range of cultural artifacts, intertextually communicating its message in an altered form of recognizable meme series, and interdiscursively to a culturally-momentous speech event necessitated by racial inequality.

The text and dual images replicate a subgenre of memes whose purpose is to highlight and caricature the vanity of someone, usually of a stereotyped group such as Instagram models or atheists. The meme series is known as "what you think you look like vs. what you actually look like" and evolved from "expectation versus reality" memes (*KnowYourMeme, n.d.*). The side-by-side images illustrate an exaggerated discrepancy between the subject's self-idealized image, and an unflattering image of the subject. In (21), in order to represent White speakers' purported self-image of *how they think they look*, when they whitesplain *why it's ok for them to use the n-word*, the user posted an image of legendary Civil Rights activist, Martin Luther King, Jr. at the 1963 March on Washington. Linking the image of King to the self-aggrandizing whitesplainer conveys the self-perception of some Whites as allies for racial minorities. The self-reflection is purely positive; they are advocates who truly understand racial inequality and their valiant actions are making a difference. However, re-contextualizing it beside the second image affects the content of the first. That is, the second image serves to contradict the first image, essentially making the point that whitesplainers' self-image is overly idealized and incorrect, realities of themselves they are blind to. The second image offers a correction to the false self-view, portraying *how they actually look*:

(21) White people trying to whitesplain to me why it's ok for them to use the n-word:

How they think they look:



How they actually look:



#N-WORD #WHITESPLAIN #RACISM

Figure 17: Multimodal Tumblr post (tum.w.5)

The second image is from an episode of the television series *Glee* in which the White character, Rachel, includes herself in the Black Student Union's yearbook photo. Posing with a raised clenched fist, she puts herself in the front of the other, seemingly puzzled, Black club members. Thus, Rachel becomes the agent of the linguistic action, metaphorically conveying "the actual" way that White people sound to POC when they whitesplain. Whitesplaining is thus represented by two opposing semiotic resources that together make two implications: first, the

blog communicates the discrepancies between the self-image and opinion of others; but more importantly, it reflects different relationships with, and structures of race and power.

In the previous two examples, the users commented on an observed pattern in the language of White people, but no specific instance of *whitesplaining* was present in the post. The next two examples, though, display interactions between POC and White users, exhibiting the unfolding of discursive events in which perceived whitesplaining language is identified and labeled. First, in (22) the exchange begins with the original tweet, posted by @KAPFAN:

(22) @KAPFAN: Watching #DearBlackAthlete with my Little One now & she asked me where the man that kneeled is. Not sure how ESPN can create this show & not have @Kaepernick7 as a speaker. He is paying the ultimate price for being a Black Athlete. #ImWithKap 🍌

@BSA: My understanding of “the ultimate price” is death [...] And that there are 1000s of pro black athletes still celebrated in the USA suggests he paid that price not “for being a black athlete” but another reason.

@MC: In other words, “shut up nigger you got money”

@C83: Sounds like that to me..

@NP: Watch the white guy whitesplain what ultimate price means to the Black guy

@BSA: [...] appropriate language is a prerequisite to a fruitful discussion [...] I mean, I’m being called racist just for questioning your description. That’s ok?

@KAPFAN: You knew what I meant from the get go. You thought it’d be cool to express your bullshit feelings [...] and got checked. You’re not interested in a “fruitful discussion”.

The first reply to the tweet comes from a White male user, @BSA, who seemingly has a goal to weaken the basis on which @KAPFAN espouses the motivations for Colin Kaepernick’s highly controversial protest.¹⁹ Other users step in, @MC uses the metapragmatic strategy of

¹⁹ Kaepernick is a former NFL football player who aimed to call attention to and peacefully protest the widespread yet largely disregarded police brutality against POC by kneeling at football matches whilst the national anthem played. One element of the protest called attention to the incongruity of POC members of the U.S. military who fight for a country that discriminates against them, resonating the grievances of the Black Panther movement of the 1960s, protesting Black American casualties in the war with Vietnam. The backlash against Kaepernick and his protest is founded largely on the belief that it disrespects American soldiers and veterans.

paraphrasing in a hypothetical quote by @BSA, *In other words, “shut up nigger you got your money.”* @MC’s analysis of the pragmatic implication of @BSA’s tweet is corroborated by @C83, *Sounds like that to me...* A fifth user, @NP, joins in the conversation, identifying @BSA’s attempt to correct and to discount the message in the original tweet: *Watch the white guy whitesplain[...]*. The White user’s response to their evaluations of his correction attempts to maintain his self-positioning as the one who is right. In his second tweet, he first justifies his reasoning, that “wrong” wording prevents productive discussions; then, positions himself as the victim and expresses self-pity for *being called racist*; then asserts his innocence *just for questioning*; and finally, *That’s ok?* points a finger at the others, positioning them as linguistic bullies. His tweet demonstrates that although no one called him racist, the others evaluations of his tweet, pointing out his language as inappropriate, led him to infer that accusation, which he laments, sustaining his spot at the center of the conversation.

The issue that @BSA has against the original tweet is primarily @ KAPFAN’s equating Kaepernick’s expulsion from the NFL as *paying the ultimate price*. On the one hand, @BSA makes a sensible argument; perhaps @ KAPFAN’s choice of words are somewhat of an overstatement. After all, the fervent criticism of Kaepernick was founded to a large extent on the view that his refusal to stand and salute the flag was disrespectful to American soldiers, i.e., the individuals who do give their lives, *the ultimate price*, in service of the country. But nonetheless, as the debate plays out, @BSA fails to express why his critique of @ KAPFAN’s wording is worth dwelling upon, attempting to blame @ KAPFAN’s lexical choice for impeding any *fruitful discussion*. @ KAPFAN gets the final word, though, calling attention to @BSA’s failure to give attention to the content of the original tweet. This point allows him to redirect @BSA’s *fruitful discussion* accusation towards @BSA’s own linguistic actions. In other words, both users make

metapragmatic judgments of the other’s language, with both speakers’ language allegedly at fault for ruining the hope of a productive conversation. In sum, these tweets exemplify a common way in which whitesplaining occurs. Regardless of the intentions of the White user, the discourse shows that he paid no attention in his response to what the original tweet was expressing.

Next, example (23) comes from Reddit and demonstrates how a White person manages their discourse within a discussion on race. In the subreddit r/BlackLadies, a post shared a video (Figure 18) from a series on MTV titled “White People Whitesplain *Whitesplaining*²⁰.”



Figure 18: Video posted on r/BlackLadies (red.w.2)

In the video, various aspects of the behavior of *whitesplain* are illustrated in the performance of an uninterrupted rotation of another White person walking into the scene already talking and lecturing the sole Black character, Franchesca, on race-related issues²¹. In most of the

²⁰ <http://www.mtv.com/episodes/w0b23r/decoded-white-people-whitesplain-whitesplaining-season-2-ep-206>

²¹ As an example, the scene begins with a White woman leaning in close to where Franchesca is seated. She says, *Hey Franchesca. Do you remember that time we were out, and that totally random girl came up and just started touching your hair, and how annoying that was for you?!* Franchesca replies, *What I remember is that you interrupted me to explain why it was offensive.* The White woman sits up proudly and stares distantly, reliving the nostalgia of her victory as a woke White girl, replying breathily, *Yeah... that was so awesome.* As Franchesca attempts to inform her White friend that she appreciates the concern but, *I don't really need you to explain racism for me. That's this thing called---* Franchesca is interrupted by a White man, who smugly finishes Franchesca’s sentence, called “*whitesplaining*” followed by a whitesplained definition of *whitesplain*. The cycle continues throughout the video, where Franchesca is never able to finish a sentence, something that goes unnoticed by the rest of the White characters who continue to hijack the conversation, justifying their entitlement to those topics with claims like, *I teach African-American studies, I grew up in a diverse neighborhood, or I went to Ferguson... or was it Baltimore?* (Ramsey, 2015). The video ends with the White characters telling a flabbergasted Franchesca, *You're welcome.*

collected comments, users discuss the parts of the video that stood out to them, such as specific quotes in the video to which they can relate their own experiences to the most, or which allusions to current events and history concerning POC were the most prototypical of *whitesplaining*. For example, one user wrote, *This is superb. I laughed all the way through it. I swear I heard some people say some of those exact same things in real life. Especially the “I went to Ferguson” and the 12 years a slave remarks. Ugh.* Amongst the users who share their own experiences and its link to the video’s humor, a self-identified White user comments:

(23) ↑ REDW: White person here. That was hilarious.

↓ REDCF: Lol care to tell us why ^{jk please don't}

↑ REDW: Sorry... I... I thought I was... I thought what I said was funny and relevant to the video.
Sorry
:c

↑ REDCB: Ooooooh@ ISWYDT (red.w.2)

The user REDW identifies herself as White and gives her opinion on the video. It is interesting that the user did not choose to simply comment that that the video was hilarious, but chose also to disclose her racial identity. It is not possible to know why the user made that choice, but one reason could be for the sake of individual and group identity management. That is, the positive appraisal suggests, “I agree with the message of the video, that White people are guilty of this type of language” and the disclosure of her own race alongside that opinion could be to mark that she is an ally, and that not all White people would be offended by the content of the video. If that was indeed her intention in her stating her race, she is paradoxically doing exactly what the White characters in the video were doing: attempting to exhibit their

understanding of racial inequality, perhaps to separate themselves from the “other type” of Whites who are either unapologetically racist or who remain blind to the prevailing forms of systemic racism. In other words, her need to divulge the fact that she is White resulted in seizing a portion of the space in which Black users’ share with one another, and diverting a portion of the discursive momentum towards her comment congratulating herself for grasping the humor of the video.

But next, REDCF replies, asking REDW to explain why she thought it was funny. REDCF clarifies the intent of the request by withdrawing the request, *jk [just kidding] please don’t*. The user writes the explicatory aside in superscript, an orthographic convention found on Reddit that is not seen on Twitter or Tumblr. The superscript follow-up is a strategy to control and plan the discourse; it communicates a parenthetical remark to signify that her question is not meant to be answered. Since getting an answer is not the goal of the question, another reason motivated the choice to post the comment. The video and reddit post centers on White people’s tendency to make discussions of race about themselves, or to discuss racial issues without considering how those issues are deeply engrained in the heritage, identities, and everyday experiences of POC. Consequently, the question serves as a test for REDW; it is daring the White person to do exactly what White characters do in the video. In REDW’s response, she apologizes and writes her apology in a way that shows she is hesitant and stumbling on her words, hence avoiding the trap of a whitesplaining accusation. REDCB’s metacommentary, *ISWYDT [I see what you did there]* recognizes the discursive play. One final observation is that REDW also says, “I thought what I said was funny and relevant to the video.” She does not reiterate that she thought the video was funny, but points to her own comment and how it relates to the video. Therefore, it is possible

that REDW's first comment was a deliberate play on the content of the video, offering further satire in the comments as a White person who was whitesplaining the video.

Concluding remarks. A number of findings have resulted in this analysis of *whitesplain*. For one, the term is a controversial one, namely due to its capacity to cause unwelcomed discomfort amongst many White users who encounter it. POC use *whitesplain* to share their own stories of conversational frustration with a White person, how it made them feel, and/or how they dealt with it. The collection of voices contributing examples of what whitesplaining looks like helps shape the understanding of what it refers to; it enregisters privileged explaining from White people to POC as a particular type of language, providing a word for a shared exasperation that was previously unnamed.

The analysis also demonstrated a variety of ways that users communicate meaning, manage the interpretation of their language, and take advantage of the affordances or work around the limitations of communicating on SNS. Specifically, RQ1b addressed how users create meaning in reiterating or challenging the semantics of *whitesplain*. Users' conflicting views on the word and its role in discourse are forces that push and pull, shaping the word to represent the most widely shared ideologies on race, language and power. And the meanings of the *whitesplain*, crowdsourced by citizen sociolinguists, show that POC are frustrated by White speakers lecturing on issues of race rather than allowing POC to tell the story. Another concern raised in the *whitesplain* discourse is the frequency in which POC feel expected to justify their reasoning and educate those who do not understand. That is, rather than listening to and respecting POC's ideas and perspectives, White speakers demand further explanation and evidence, requiring POC's time and energy – a speech/literacy event that could be avoided if Whites simply listened silently and respectfully in the first place. Conversely, the word is often

re-appropriated, reversing the directionality of the communication, and labeling *whitesplain* as a racist term, prejudiced against Whites. In this view, those who use *whitesplain* are the ones who are racist (against Whites), or at least, they are problematic in the improvement of race relations (which to them means the maintenance of White hegemony) of. Paradoxically, the act of whitesplaining and stating that *whitesplain* is racist, are both considered by POC to shift the conversation about race to focus on the White perspective.

Finally, the presentation of discourse to address RQ1c and RQ1d revealed a variety of ways that users call attention to language they mark as whitesplaining. The analysis also illustrated two differing situations of White users navigating their way through interactions in which their comments have been potentially flagged as uninvited or condescending remarks on issues they cannot have more knowledge of, on the grounds of their race. It was also observed in this section that many of the texts in the *whitesplain* dataset only used *whitesplain* as a parenthetical or metacommentary hashtag, not within the content of the tweet/post/comment itself. Another strategy was by creating meaning through intertextual links, drawing on other discourses, and making use of multimodal affordances of the SNS writing spaces. Overall, the various ways that users point out, categorize, evaluate, and display whitesplaining language draws from the macro-context of race and culture, hegemony in sociolinguistics, and the praxes of digital discourse, and thus situates *whitesplain* within history, popular culture and media, current events, and the meaning-making practices of Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr.

Richsplain

In this section, I present the discourses around the term *richsplain* in the collected texts and co-texts, in which the word is largely used by internet users to call attention to language, usually from news headlines, social media posts, or personal interactions. Language use that is

highlighted by way of *richsplain* is perceived to address economic discrepancies in an inaccurate and/or disdainful manner. As one Tumblr user writes, *richsplaining* is “when a person who hasn’t experienced poverty gives you patronizing advice on how to get out of poverty” (*tum.r.3*). After a brief clarification of terminology used in this subsection, a selection of texts is presented to demonstrate more specific instances of how these discourses develop.

Defining class. The sociolinguistic divisions of class are associated with differences in social prestige and power and are inextricably linked to wealth (Block, 2016). Yet the social differences in socioeconomic status are gradable and arbitrary, and thus more difficult to define than groups like ‘men’ and ‘women.’ The differences, though, are nonetheless valid and recognizable to practically any member of society, regardless of how differently class might be viewed by the individual or various groups to which they are a part.

In sociology, class divisions are based, essentially, on social status and power: “Status refers to whether people are respected and deferred to by others in their society (or, conversely, looked down on or ignored), and power refers to the social and material resources a person can committ, the ability (and social right) to make decisions and influence events” (Guy, 1988, p. 37). In sociolinguistics, labeling class and identifying class differences has largely been examined in terms of speakers’ language patterns at the phonetic, phonological, syntactic, and semantic levels, such as William Labov’s (1986) well-known department store survey.²² In other words, class has been involved in the study of language in terms of social variation and it frequently comes to align with linguistic ideologies of “standard” and “substandard” forms of speaking amongst various speech communities who share a similar status of capital and power.

²² Labov (1986) illustrates the social stratification of the presence or absence of the post-vocalic /r/ in NYC department stores. He found that the /r/ was pronounced more frequently by those with higher socioeconomic status.

Defining class has been a problem that sociolinguists have always faced because – while social institutions delineate groups such as professionals, unskilled workers, white-collar, or blue-collar – these differences have not been sufficient for research. This is due to the complication of approaching class based on variables like income, occupation, residence location, level of education, social networking, and consumption patterns (Block, 2016, p. 80), as well as the intersection of class with race, gender, age, and numerous other social groups divisions. Additionally, the sociological idea of class prestige changes over time and across societies. Certainly, the field of sociolinguistics has more recently aimed to avoid oversimplifying categories such as social class. However, in the *richsplain* dataset, the class is generally distinguished by the citizen sociolinguists into two groups: rich/wealthy or poor/working class, (i.e., the construction of another binary for something that is continuous).

These categories are ambiguous since users hardly clarify how they define *rich people* or *poor people*; but I believe this observation is in and of itself worthy of noting. It suggests, at least, that when users talk about class, they may assume their conception of what types of people, behaviors, or professions indicate *rich* or *poor* is a perception shared by others; there is an assumption of intersubjectively held understandings of class delineations. In the few instances where users elucidate their image of *rich*, there is a clear dichotomy of “us” and “them.” They describe the upper-class as a group secluded both from the realities of the poor, as well as unaware of their own privilege.

- (1) I usually cut [the richsplainers] off and say that we can’t do what they obviously did, which is fall out of a vagina attached to money (*tum.r.3*)
- (2) and they always forget to mention their born privilege and extensive network of support. (*tum.r.4*)
- (3) they think being poor means not being able to buy that 4th car, third house or fourth vacation this year. *barf* (*tum.r.3*)

- (4) every white person's upper middle class aunt who writes "get a better job" on the tip line of her restaurant bill (*tum.r.2*)

Elsewhere in the data, SNS users' usages of *richsplain* label the economically privileged in a number of ways, e.g., *rich people*, *bourgeois*, *Hollywood celebs*, *privileged white folks*, *wealthy whites*, *smug pundits*, and *billionaires who try to be of the people or pretend to understand the commoners*. Those at the receiving end of richsplain language are labeled by users as *poor people*, *common folks*, and *poors*, sometimes more specifically as *millennials*, *Medicaid recipients*, *fast-food employees*, and residents of places like *trailer parks* and *the projects*. In the discussion below, I have decided to use the labels "rich people" and "poor people." This generalized classification does not in any way address the complexities of class, power, and wealth discussed above; however, my rationalization is based on the labels' functions to (1) effectively differentiate between who is accused of richsplaining, and who is richsplained to; and (2) to represent the "Us versus Them" element in the labels most favored by the Citizen Sociolinguists who authored the data.

RQ1a – Meta-level of *richsplain* usages. In the subset of 168 retrieved items, the word *richsplain* only appears 40 times, but the corresponding co-texts provide a wealth (no pun intended) of insights on how people talk about class-related issues, and how the neologism helps fuel these discussions. Table 7 shows the distribution of how *richsplain* is used across the texts and co-texts and the three different platforms:

Table 7: Meta-level of uses across platforms – RQ1a for richsplains

Meta-level	1			2			3		
	texts	co-texts	total	texts	co-texts	total	texts	co-texts	total
Twitter	10	2	12	0	4	4	0	0	0
Reddit	5	0	4	0	4	4	0	0	0
Tumblr	4	3	7	3	5	8	0	0	0
Total	19	5	24	3	13	16	0	0	0

As shown above, 19 of the 22 texts – the items retrieved through the keyword search – are used as part of the message, e.g., as a verb, such as, *I think she only knows how to #richsplains her POV [point of view] i don't think she knows what it's like to be a commoner (tw.r.3)*. Conversely, amongst the co-texts (N=18), the word is primarily used metasemantically, that is, to talk about the word itself. For instance: *Recently I've realized how much 'splaining' I've been subjected to. Now adding richsplains to the list! [tum.r.3]*. What this suggests is that one user writes a post/tweet/comment using *richsplains*, and subsequent responses make note of the new word and are prompted to discuss it. This shows how one individual's use of the word simultaneously comment on a way of speaking about class and mark it as richsplaining and inform others of an identified pattern in class-related communicative dynamics.

Of the sixteen uses of *richsplains* at the meta²level, a noteworthy handful of eight instances not only talk *about* the word, but they specifically discuss *richsplains* in terms of it being *the new mansplains*. This observation is made by SNS users who are both supportive and disdainful of the neologism's presence in online conversations. As an example, a Tumblr user's original post (6) propositions prospective readers, *Can we make Richsplaining a thing? [tum.r.4]*. The following question in the post further supports the users' request by clarifying *richsplains* through analogy, *like mansplaining, but...* The choice here to allude to *mansplains* as a

reference point, but without providing explanation of *mansplain*, shows that there is an *a priori* understanding of *mansplain* for the author and their target audience, which speaks to the scope in which *mansplain* has become recognized in SNS discourse. Additionally, the post’s numerous hashtags all relate to class apart from one, *#mansplaining*, a tag that helps associate the issues encompassed by the less-familiar *richsplain* with the better-known *mansplain*.

(5) Can we make Richsplaining a thing? Like mansplaining, but when rich people try to talk to workers and the poor about economics? *#RICH PEOPLE #RICHSPAINING #MANSPLAINING #CLASSISM #ECONOMICS #RICH #POOR #WORKING CLASS #MARXISM #INEQUALITY #CAPITALISM #FRIGGIN CAPITALISTS #CAPITALISTS #POVERTY #BOURGEOISIE* (tum.r.4)

Amongst the other metasemantic posts about *richsplain*, the metasemantic commentary is positive. Users show delight or positivity of some kind when they make note of the newest word in their lexicon. In the Twitter examples below, users bring attention to the word and convey their stance of approval and amusement. In (6), the user points out the word by hashtagging it, and adds emojis of love and laughter. In (7), the user points out the word by repeating it in quotation marks and communicates stance with a thumbs-up and writing out: **snicker**. Lyons (2018) refers to this usage of asterisks around a word as a type of *kineticon*, or a kinesthetic icon (as opposed to the emotional icon of emoticons or emojis’ functions as ideograms). Kineticons are typographical strategies that use symbols like asterisks or underscores around lexical items “to activate sensory associations in the readers... They represent embodied actions... such as gestures, body positioning, facial expressions, as well as... shivering, blushing, and yawning” (p. 20). Kineticons are popular in written digital language to incorporate nonverbal, paraverbal, and extra-linguistic cues that would be present in the spoken form, and in (8), effectively communicate the user’s amusement.

(6) *#RICHSPAIN* 🥰😄👏😂 (tw.r.7)

(7) **snicker** 👍 “richsplain” (tw.r.2)

Another example from Reddit comes from a post linking to a video clip of political talk-show host Bill Maher, titled “Bill Maher richsplains liberalism to progressives: ‘Go fuck yourselves’.” All of the subsequent comments discuss the content of the video apart from the top (i.e., the most up-voted) comment, which addresses the usage of *richsplain* in the video title:

(8) Damn, credit for “richsplain” that is the one that makes sense out of all the *splains I heard throughout the election. (*red.rich.1*)

Like the preceding example, the user in (8) praises the existence of the term, and justifies their stance by comparing *richsplain* to other *splain* words. The user’s comment makes an implicit and perhaps unintentional statement about their identity by declaring preference for *richsplain* over other, previously-encountered but unspecified *splain* words. This comment, then, may signify that the redditor does not easily sympathize with the experiences embodied by other terms like *mansplain* or *whitesplain*, but the user can understand the struggles of financially-troubled groups and the language that *richsplain* points out. On Tumblr, another user (9) more directly describes his being enlightened on gendered imbalances in language on account of *richsplain*:

(9) I’ve always understood that mansplaining must be frustrating, and certainly I’ve had things I already understood explained to me badly by less-qualified people, but until reading this [post about richsplaining] I didn’t fully appreciate how utterly soul-destroyingly enraging mansplaining must be to women everywhere, and for that I apologize (*tum.r.3*).

In the two previous subsections, in discussions about *mansplain* and *whitesplain*, we saw that users expressed both approval and disapproval of the words’ existence. In contrast, users’ discussions of *richsplain* is almost entirely favorable in the dataset. Only one Twitter user (10) seemed to criticize the term:

(10) User A: Go to a church or a food bank #freeloader #goldbricking

User B: Stop being a selfish imp. Every day you live- you are sharing in other people's money - you think you built that highway all by yourself?

User A: 😂😂😂😂

User B: Exactly, you are a laughable joke. Stop trying to richsplain poor people, you're very bad at it.

User A: "richsplain" HAHAHAH your Envy and Greed are showing (tw.r.9)

User A's original tweet addresses *the problem with food stamps* and includes an image of President Barack Obama and makes the argument that *lifelong Democrat voters* are borne from *promising them someone else's fish*, an allusion to the proverb "Give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day; teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." With the image of Obama and direct mentions of *Democrats* (as well as *republicans* and *Trump voters* in other comments) the argument is no doubt based to some degree on party politics, and User B's use of *richsplain* becomes a tool for User A to dismiss her outlook as entertainingly asinine without having to respond to her attempt to point out his hypocrisy. Similar to instances in which SNS users disparage others' viewpoints based on non-standard grammar or orthography, people like User A also make use of neologisms in the same way, even if elsewhere on other topics, neologisms and wordplay are embraced by the same individuals.

In essence, User A's criticism of *richsplain* is a performance through which he manages his identity, indexically positioning himself as a citizen with an opposing – and superior – viewpoint from User B. Overall, the context of the criticism suggests User A's derision had more of a rhetorical function for his political argument than a critique of the overall class-related communication that the word embodies across other contexts.

So far, I have discussed various ways and implications of how users talk about the word *richsplain*, which covers the meta²level of usages. It should be noted that RQ1a for *richsplain* found no instances of the word being used at the meta³⁺level, unlike in the RQ1a findings for *mansplain* and *whitesplain*. While there might be some reasons one could speculate for this fact, it is not possible to know from the current dataset. However, it does align with the likelihood that *richsplain* is a much newer neologism than its *man* and *white* variants. The smaller amount of variation in *richsplain* usage may at least reflect that currently, issues concerning the relationship between language and economic backgrounds are overshadowed in the wider social consciousness than the language and communication of race and gender. In the following section, users' employment of *richsplain* as a verb in the message (meta¹level) will be discussed to shed light on semantic values that users assign to the word.

RQ1b – Semantic values expressed by *richsplain* usages. In comparison to *whitesplain* and *mansplain* discussed previously, there is very little dispute amongst users on what *richsplain* means. Nonetheless, the texts and co-texts reveal SNS users' ideas about whose language can be labeled as richsplaining and why, as well as what issues or ways of speaking are more likely to be categorized by users as richsplaining. In the example below, the Twitter user retweets a celebrity's comment that says, *And Bernie "free hotdogs on fridays" Sanders*, putting that language on display with his own commentary:

- (11) User A: This Rich White asshole is literally trying to richsplain us that Bernie Sanders fighting to give people fair wages, Healthcare and education via taxes (a.k.a. with the people's money) is equal to giving out "free hot dogs".

User B [reply to User A]: When you're a wealthy, white, bourgeois "feminist" like [her], you don't realize that "free hot-dogs" on Fridays could mean the difference between functioning or going hungry. (*tw.r.1*).

Here, the wealthy celebrity's critique of Bernie Sanders and his economic policies is discussed by the Twitter users as an exemplar of privileged explaining based on the fact as a

wealthy celebrity, she does not possess the access of experience to make such a comment. User B furthers the argument by labeling her as a *wealthy, white, bourgeois “feminist”*. The user’s decision to put *feminist* in scare quotes communicates his views that what feminism stands for is not represented by the celebrity he describes. His labeling her status not only as *wealthy*, but also *white* bolster his argument that she is incapable of realizing the reality and pervasiveness of hunger in the country.

Not all uses of *richsplain* align with the more prominent definition, e.g., seen in (6), which maintain the understanding that richsplaining is derogatory speech against the poor, justified by assumptions about the work ethic or financial choices of the lower socioeconomic strata. In (12) from Twitter, two users’ replies reveal an extension of the semantic value of *richsplain* in their replies to a Hollywood actor’s tweet concerning class and pregnancy and family-planning options. Here, the accused richsplainer speaks not against the poor; in fact, the actor speaks on behalf of the poor. Nonetheless, due to her status in Hollywood – and therefore her assumed wealth and detachment from the realities of the poor – some fellow Twitterers label her tweet as *richsplaining*:

(12) Hollywood: Anyone who doesn’t understand that choice is directly connected to women’s economic destiny doesn’t really understand the poor.

Reply A: @HOLLYWOOD Y’all, let’s listen to a Hollywood actress richsplain our poverty to us!

Reply B: @HOLLYWOOD @REPLYA Did a privileged white actress from a Hollywood family just #richsplain to common folks on Twitter the true understanding of being poor? [attached image: figure 18] (tw.r.4)



Figure 19: Screenshot of animated gif in (tw.r.4)

In ReplyA, the syntactic structure of a suggestion – *Y'all, let's listen* – is performed in order to mock what the actor is doing in her tweet by satirically playing the role of a helpless poor who needs a rich person to explain economics to her and her fellow poverty sufferers. Sarcastic requests to have something [x]splained is a common metapragmatic strategy (Bridges, 2017), done to call attention to the notion that the speakers assume their explanation is worthwhile when in fact the explanation is not welcomed by the intended audience. Coupled with the tag *richsplain*, the sarcasm positions the actor as presumptuous and her tweet as an impertinence. The second reply, accompanied by an animated graphic (Figure 18), utilizes the syntax of an interrogatory, supplemented by an indirect answer to that question – i.e., the text, *oh no you didn't*, and the cat's laconic expression in the image. Together the tweet and image pragmatically communicate that the actor's comments were unacceptable and annoyingly common. Both of these replies to the original tweet about women's choices show that regardless of *what* is being explained, that *who* is doing the explaining may also play a role in what constitutes privileged explaining. This expands the scope of what could be subjected to potential linguistic policing based on claims of having more epistemic ownership of the experience.

As discussed above, discourses around *richsplain* generate a range of perspectives on class differences. Judgements on who can richsplain to whom reveal a mix of ideologies, such as the delineation of “rich” and “poor.” Socioeconomic status is not a fixed categorization; what “rich” and “poor” signify is relative to the individual and the context. Additionally, there can be significant shifts on the socioeconomic scale, e.g., when a wealthy person who grew up in poverty gives advice to the lower class. On a Tumblr post, the unstable nature of wealth and how it relates to *richsplain*, is raised in the comments. The users in (13) comment on a post that

shared the definition of *richsplain* as “when a person who hasn’t experienced poverty gives you patronizing advice on how to get out of poverty”:

(13) Tumblr A: yeah um someone who is not in poverty probably knows better about getting out of it lmao

Tumblr B: ↻[tumblr A](#) What the hell makes you think this is coming from people who’ve EVER been poor? “Clearly a bird knows more about getting out of the sea than a fish” lmao

Tumblr C: ↻[tumblr A](#) It SAYS people who have never experienced poverty. it would be great to hear from people who escaped poverty but over and over we hear from people who never needed to escape (tum.r.5)

The first comment from A attempts to disparage the notion of *richsplain*; their argument essentially states, “there’s nothing wrong with listening to someone who knows better.” Tumblr B steps in and confronts A with an insult, *What the hell makes you think...*, which draws attention, somewhat combatively, to the problem with A’s argument. Then a third user offers more a constructive reply. Tumblr C emphasizes *it SAYS*, making an argumentative turn from A’s comment by highlighting the element that A overlooked: *people who have never experienced poverty*. Then she returns to A’s argument that some undoubtedly know more on the subject, and unlike B, she offers some support by saying, indeed those who should be giving advice are people who actually have some firsthand experience on the topic. In effect, C simultaneously agrees that there is some validity in A’s comment, points out where it is misguided, and explains why: that in reality, advice on economic mobility customarily comes from *people who never needed to escape*.

In these exchanges, we can observe how users interact and negotiate what *richsplain* means, what it does not mean, and why it is a valid term. In turn, these interactions interweave new strands of sociolinguistic awareness around an identified category of speech; richsplaining

becomes enregistered as a socio-ideological object, a form of language actively recognized in social dialogue.

RQ1c and RQ1d – Pragmatic functions and metapragmatic strategies in *richsplain* uses. So far, the analysis of *richsplain* has focused on the meta-level and the semantic values that emerge. In this section, I address how users’ pragmatic and metapragmatic skills allow them to discuss *richsplain*, and in turn, communicate their sociopragmatic ideologies about class and wealth.

Typically, in the posts and comments surrounding instances of *richsplain*, individual users repost pieces of language with their own added commentary. They utilize the word to succinctly describe their evaluation of what that language is doing, and call attention to patterns they observe in class-related discourse. The language marked as *richsplaining* often makes claims about the origins or causes of income inequality by placing blame on the behaviors and choices of lower-earning groups of society. For example, a Tumblr user reblogged an infographic titled “10 ways to build wealth while on minimum wage,” which included recommendations to minimum-wage earners like *move to an affordable city*, *invest your money*, and *learn to cook; spices are your friend!* While *richsplain* is only used in the post’s tags, comments from others use *richsplain* and other metapragmatic strategies to contribute to the conversation, making connections between the language of the infographic, and broader outlooks on socioeconomic problems. In essence, these users employ various linguistic practices to link the micro (the infographic) and the macro (widespread class-related misunderstandings).

Intertextual and interdiscursive links provide users with a prolific source of meaning making. The two examples below allude to other texts (14) or ways of speaking (15) to communicate their evaluation on the *richsplaining* language highlighted in a Tumblr post:

(14) I feel like every list of “Helpful Money-Saving Tips” qualifies as richsplaining
(*tum.r.3*)

(15) See: “U.S. politics” (*tum.r.3*)

Example (14) indirectly defines the infographic as richsplaining by grouping it with other lists that aim to give financial advice. By referencing these other lists, the user shares a pattern they have observed in how class and the realities of poorer folks are discussed, i.e., that this genre of discourse is characterized as oblivious condescension towards society’s have-nots. Example (15) also draws on written genres to make its point and is an example of interdiscursivity. Utilizing a formal writing technique of alluding to other literature (*See: “U.S. politics”*), the comment is able to succinctly make a point. That is, the comment applies “U.S. politics” to the notion of richsplaining, and accordingly metonymizes the country’s systematic approach to major social issues like class warfare, paralleling the condescending discursive practices of the infographic with much broader economic issues.

The example below (16) is a reddit post titled “Billionaires against income inequality: Pure ideology edition,” linking to a video about billionaires in favor of ending the divide between the haves and the have nots. In the comments, the redditors remark on the video in ways that simultaneously communicate their opinion about the video and on the larger issue of income inequality. Users are often able to do this in a very succinct manner by creatively using language strategies such as abbreviations, offering new *splain* wordplay, or satirizing other speakers in a variety of ways. The three comments below exemplify some of these strategies:

(16) redditor A: tldr: *what are the words i need to say to get them off my back*

redditor B: “Look around you. America is divided. Let us billionaires richsplain.”

redditor C: “Bourgsplain” (*red.r.2*)

In the first comment above, redditor A utilizes an internet acronym *tl;dr* (i.e., *too long; didn't read*), often employed to signal a summary of a text. For instance, if a SNS user posts a lengthy text, the author may add a *tl;dr* at the end that paraphrases the text for others who are not interested in reading the entire post. Likewise, another user in the comments section may post their own *tl;dr* for other readers. Redditor A's comment plays with this acronym, pretending to summarize the video of billionaires discussing income inequality. This strategy allows the redditor to communicate their commentary on the video's content. The comment portrays rich people saying whatever they think will assuage the poor and minimize the negative attention on their inflated wealth and lifestyles. Using *tl;dr* not only implies that a summary is needed because the video is not worth the time required to watch it, but it also serves as a humorous façade for the user's opinion on the video. Similarly, Redditor B's comment speaks on behalf of the rich to provide commentary on the language of the video, but with a slightly different strategy. The comment provides a partial quote from the video (*Look around you. America is divided*), followed by the user's added final sentence, *let us billionaires richsplain*, disguised (in a deliberately poor manner) as part of the original language of the video.

Redditor C's one-word reply communicates their attitude by reassigning the *splain* word with the affix *bourg-*, alluding to *bourgeois*. This transformation of *richsplain* to *bourgsplain* concisely presents the user's judgement that rich speakers talking about class are not simply "rich;" more specifically, they are members of the bourgeois class, consequently integrating elements of power, lifestyle, and status that "rich" may not overtly communicate. While "bourgeois" have in some genres denoted the middle class, in the *richsplain* discourse, *bourgeois* is used several times in ways that seemingly index the Marxist view of class division, where only the bourgeois controlled the means of power from the laws and political systems, to the

classification of what represents knowledge, values, and success (Bourgeoisie, n.d.). A similar understanding of *bourgeois* can be seen on *UrbanDictionary.com*, an online open dictionary, where the top definition (the definition with the most votes from users), aligns with how the word is popularly used today in slang language. Figure 20 shows an excerpt from the top definition, the popular pronunciation of the word as “BOO-zhee,” and an example sentence that accompanied the definition:

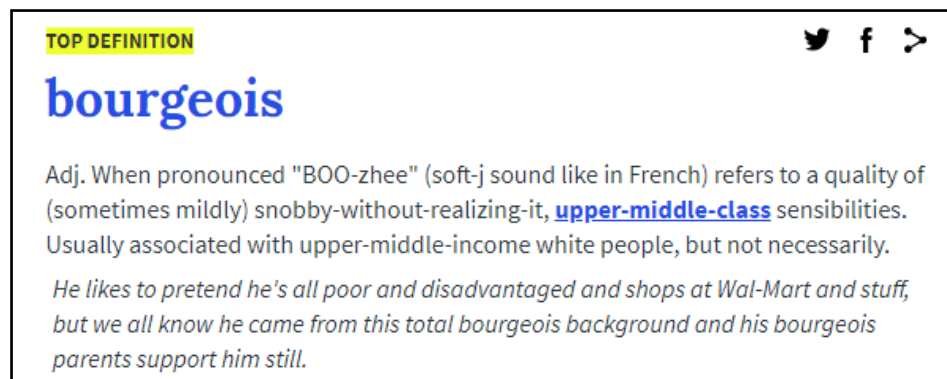


Figure 20: Screenshot of top *UrbanDictionary.com* definition of *bourgeois* (*Bourgeois*, 2010)

Alongside several mentions of *bourgeois*, users reference other historical figures and events known for their link to class struggle, namely the French Revolution. For instance, in the aforementioned Tumblr post that shared the infographic on how to get out of poverty mentioned above, the author’s caption (17) is a suggestion to put a guillotine on display as a reminder that even monarchs with absolute sovereignty have been overthrown by the masses. Example (18) is one of the replies to the “Bernie free-hotdogs-on-friday Sanders” tweet (introduced above in example 11), which also references the age of the guillotine, specifically alluding to the words attributed to Marie Antoinette, “Let them eat cake,” a quote that symbolizes the royals’ selfish disregard for the peasants’ hunger and poverty.

(17) Really need to bring the guillotine back. We don’t even need to use it, just put it where the ppl who wrote this article can see it. Be reminded. (*tum.r.2*)

(18) Didn’t Marie Antoinette have a similar quote? (*tw.r.1*)

(19) Get your torches, get your pitchforks, get your machetes, go get whatever you've got and LETS MAKE RICH PEOPLE AFRAID AGAIN!!! (*tum.r.3*)

A similar strategy is seen in (19) from Tumblr in a response to an example of *richsplaining*. The user makes two intertextual allusions, one to the trope of an angry pitchfork-and-torch-wielding mob. The other references the slogan “Make America great again,” a slogan that has been altered so much that the structure of “make [noun] [adjective] again” has become a popular memetic construction since the most recent U.S. presidential campaign. In the rephrasing, *make rich people afraid again*, the user also makes reference to times in history when the ones in power feared the proletariat’s potential to revolt and overthrow them. By relating historical figures, events, and ideas to a linguistic object, i.e., to the *richsplain*, these users are not only commenting on the featured *richsplain* language of the post but situating it within a much broader scene of class struggles across time and space. The intertextuality and interdiscursivity functions to make multiple arguments and link multiple ideas in order to compact multiple meanings into a creatively concise message. In turn, the authors are able to construct identities and index their stances toward the various elements of their comments.

What is interesting about the historical-reference strategy seen here is that it is in fact unique to *richsplain*. Considering the ubiquity of gender- and race-related conflicts across the centuries and the globe, it seems curious that historical figures and events show up exclusively in *richsplain* discourses. The reason is perhaps due to there being no need for *mansplain* or *whitesplain* to reference historical events when each week provides fresh new stories of the consequences of gender and racial inequality. Of course, class is interwoven in many discussions of social equity, but currently there is no movement or trending hashtag that addresses class specifically, like there is for race and gender. Countless other possibilities could be speculated, but what the data do show is that in *richsplain* discussions, drawing parallels to historical

struggles and shifts in class structures are a useful tool in contributing to the understanding of what *richsplain* signifies.

While the historical references are unique to *richsplain*, the next strategy occurs frequently across all of the dataset. To highlight language as richsplaining, users employ the method of “ventriloquism,” or the art of making a voice seem to come from a source other than the speaker (Cooren, 2010, p. 85). As a ventriloquist disguises his voice and speaks for his puppet, users speak for others whose language they wish to mock, quoting a cliché or exaggerating the elements of the quote in order to point out the excessiveness and irrationality of it. Many of the users’ comments simply contain a quote, for instance: “*just work harder,*” “*just get a job,*” “*just save money,*” or “*you just have to work*”. The fact that these quotes all contain the word *just* add to the enregistered understanding of what *richsplain* language is, i.e., talking about how to become wealthy as a simple, one-step concept. This further illustrates the aloofness of the rich people to their own privilege and the realities of the poor. The examples below (20-23) also ventriloquize the rich, but add more details, presenting their interpretation of how rich people view poverty and the poor, which simultaneously satirizes the rich as oblivious and supercilious. The ventriloquized speech of the rich are underlined:

- (20) “these angry working class folk just don’t understand healthcare policy” umm no it’s that working class understands it far too well. (*tw.r.8*)
- (21) im convinced these advice articles for poor people are written for middleclass and rich people so they can assuage any guilt they might have. “cant feel guilty for poor people if its their fault ya know.” (*tum.r.1*)
- (22) “Don’t worry about the fact that mansions and jets are assets that can be sold for money and you, a poor, have nothing of value. We’ll tell you what wealth is.” (*tum.r.4*)
- (23) “Just cut out the daily starbucks, it’ll save you 5-7 bucks a day and you could take a cruise” IT’S SO SIMPLE (*tum.r.3*)

Another common theme in users' discussions of class-related issues and perceived richsplaining is to offer rebuttals to the accusations of poor spending choices, or state why the suggestions presented by richsplainers would be irrational for poor people. These users simulate a second turn in a conversation, a reply to someone who is richsplaining in some way to them, for instance:

- (24) “buy in bulk” I don't have any money, susan (*tum.r.2*)
- (25) oh ok i'll just sell my couch every week which will give me infinite money (*tum.r.3*)
- (26) if I didn't eat out SO MUCH I could save money? Bitch my fast food once a week is a fucking TREAT because I can't afford to eat out. (*tum.r.2*)
- (27) You worked in an ice cream shop? Oh well here is your 'woman of the people' award. (*tw.r.2*)

In (24), (26), and (27), the users speak directly to the imagined richsplainer, *Susan*, *you* and *Bitch*, respectively. Examples (24), (25), and (26) offer replies to financial advice, explaining why that advice is pointless. They illustrate rich people as oblivious to the fact that they are telling poor people things they already know. The replies communicate that the penniless are not ignorant of money-saving tips, but rather that the rich are the ignorant ones; they are forgetful that one must have some money in the first place to carry out suggestions like *buy in bulk*,” “don't eat out so much,” or the suggestion that (25) responds to: “sell your assets”. Additionally, these comments show that rich people are aloof to the differences between themselves and poor people, not only in terms of capital, but to the extent to which money affects all the minutiae of their lives.

One final note on how the uses of *richsplain* reflect SNS users' broader outlook on class and language is also found in what the discourses did not include: criticism against the rich for anything other than how they talk to and about poor folks. I will note that in (11) and (12) the richsplainers were both celebrities and were called *white asshole* and *white bourgeois*

“feminist”. But apart from those insults on high-profile, public individuals, the other alleged richsplaining rich people are never called insulting names. The rich people that do the richsplaining are never accused of being greedy or corrupt. Their wealth or assets are never said to be undeserved. No threatening or aggressive language against the rich showed up anywhere in the dataset. Unlike with *mansplain*, *whitesplain*, and *thinsplain*, where men, White people, and thin people were involved in many of the ongoing dialogues, in the *richsplain* language, the voices of the rich are absent in the SNS dialogues. In other words, richsplaining language is only put on display by the SNS users, but in no instances did a self-described rich person enter the conversation to refute the complaints. There are many possible reasons for this difference. For example, *richsplain* is a less common *splain* and may not be visible to any wealthy people who would respond to it. But also, unlike an accusation of being sexist, racist, or guilty of fat-shaming or body-shaming that have been seen to have detrimental results to one’s reputation and even their employment, being called a classist is not something that is known to have repercussions.

The *richsplaining* discourses focused conclusively on two things: (1) the life of a working-class citizen – the experiences, plights, and means of survival; and (2) the misrepresentation of the life of a working-class citizen in mainstream language about class. SNS users seem to understand the power of language on society. They understand that the derogatory language about poor people is shared by individuals, communities, institutions, and society as a whole, and they understand how that language influences wider ideologies about class, wealth, power, and poverty.

Concluding remarks. In the presentation of *richsplain* data, I first discussed how users talk about the word *richsplain*, showing that by and large, users do not reject the legitimacy of the word and what it describes, at least in my dataset. Unlike with the other three *splain* words of

the study, there is no “reversal” of the semantic value of *richsplain*. In terms of the meanings that are present, people use *richsplain* as a verb in their posts to exhibit it as (a) oversimplified ideas that place blame strictly on the financial choices of the economically-afflicted; as well as (b) banal and absurd suggestions for solving the convoluted issue of economic inequality. Overall, users draw on their metapragmatic awareness and ability to manipulate language in various ways to be citizen sociolinguists and discuss perceived problems in how class (specifically the lower classes) is talked about (specifically, by the upper class). The word *richsplain* allows users to display language that they perceive to be presumptuous explanations for the persistence of poverty, as well as unfair and irreprehensible ways of talking about class and/or lower-class citizens. All in all, the dialogues share a single frustration towards how poor people are misjudged by the rich. Their frustration lies in the idea that the voices of the lower-classes are absent in the macro discourses about class, and that accusatory and condescending language about the poor is thus presented as and understood to be truthful and indisputable. The neologism *richsplain* allows people to identify and label their frustration, and as more and more people talk about it and other forms of *splain*, it becomes enregistered in the socio-ideological consciousness of the masses.

The discussions around *richsplain* also demonstrates how class is “imagined” in the United States; that is, it is not as visible as other social categories. In wider discourses about wealth distribution, economic disparities are not addressed as directly as gender or racial inequality. In comparison to the overt class system of the United Kingdom where everyone’s class is known by noticeable class markers in one’s language and behavior, the U.S. class system is a covert one, ostensibly measuring system on merit (Milroy, 2001). The micro discourses around *richsplain* presented here reflect macro-scale ideologies of the American subconscious,

based on popular beliefs of “the American dream,” and “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.” The values of hard work and individual initiative, promoted by laissez-faire capitalism, are entrenched in American culture. However, the right to wealth and materialism through hard work and independence, a value with potential for good, has been “absolutized” by those in power, resulting in “greed and exploitation of the economically deprived” (Hughes, 2003, p. 7). Over the past forty years, wealth inequality has progressively increased due to the American economy siphoning wealth from the poor to the rich – “reverse Robin Hood-style” (Ingraham, 2018). Despite expanding income inequality, Americans are still subject to the popular “rags to riches” discourses, beliefs that a strong work ethic results in self-made wealth, to the point that these myths have become truths in the American psyche (Hughes, 2003; Kaufman, 2018). The uses of *richsplain* by SNS users not only shed light on how engrained the dogma of self-reliance is in American society, but how citizen sociolinguists share insights with one another, strengthening their understanding of how results of wealth inequality manifest in everyday language.

Thinsplain

The fourth and final *splain* of focus is *thinsplain*. On the whole, the word refers to patronizing language about body size. The word brings to light a wide range of personal, social, and institutional issues related to body size, as well as the variability of who has an authority to speak about those issues. The *thinsplain* discourses reflect recent movements for body acceptance, for greater inclusion of diverse body types in the fashion and entertainment industries, and widespread backlash against incidents of body-shaming or fat-shaming. Around the globe, fat activism and Fat Studies work to contest the negative stereotypes of fat bodies. 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.

After a brief overview of scholarly approaches to body size and a clarification of terminology used in this subsection, a selection of texts is presented below to demonstrate more specific linguistic features of how these discourses develop.

Defining body size. Before I review body size studies and present the findings, it is important to make note of some specific terminology used below. 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 (Nash & Warin, 2017; Van Amsterdam, 2012). Similar to the reappropriation of other words used as slurs or to insult, such as women using *bitch* as a term of endearment for one another, 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). My decision to use *fat* was also influenced by the justification of Van Amsterdam (2012), who explains:

“...I use the term ‘fat’ instead of ‘overweight’ or ‘obese’ for two reasons. First, the term ‘fat’ highlights the social constructedness of differentiation based on body size, while the terms ‘overweight’ and ‘obesity’ are generally related to thinking of body size issues in terms of medical ‘truths’. Second, the term ‘fat’ is used by activists and scholars who aim to claim and affirm positive fat identity (Brandon and Prichard, 2011). In reference to medicalized notions of fatness, I sometimes use the terms ‘obesity’ and ‘obesity discourse’. These include a focus on [people who are considered overweight and obese]” (p. 12).

Likewise, I use the label *fat* when referring to people who do not self-describe as thin, but at times I also use ‘obesity discourse’ to refer to the ideologies of fatness in the medical world – as well as the mainstream conventions of talking about fatness – in relation to diseases or disabilities.

The movement to shift the sociopragmatic meaning of *fat* from negative to positive has been a major platform for fat activism and Fat Studies. Fat activism is a globally-reaching social movement of fat people and “fat supporters,” whose primary message is that being both fat and healthy is perfectly reasonable and a current reality for millions of people – people nonetheless stigmatized by their medical status as *overweight* or *obese* (Chastain, 2018). Fat activism promotes body positivity for fat people and fat acceptance within society in general. Fat Studies is an academic field that critically examines the representations of body size in health and medical sciences, as well as sociology, pedagogy, fine arts, liberal arts, popular culture, media studies, and many other fields. The studies investigate how and why fat people are oppressed, how to solve the problem of fat oppression, and initiatives for abating negative associations of fat bodies (Rothblum, 2012).

In Western societies around the globe, such as the Netherlands (van Amsterdam, 2012), and Australia (Nash & Warin, 2017), these associations seek to counter the negative stereotypes of fat bodies. Fatness has for decades been aligned with “lacking in moral fibre, diseased, greedy, lazy, not just ugly but disgusting, pathetic, underclass, worthless, a repulsive joke, *a problem that needs to be treated and prevented*” (Cooper, 2008, p. 2), which engenders fat people’s self-hatred and promotes discrimination against fat people. In studies of how body size is discussed in mainstream society, two dominant discourses emerge: the relation of body size to beauty, and to health. These ideologies are grounded in the binary nature of body size as either “fat” or “thin.” While body size is a gradable category, as Noortje van Amsterdam (2012) notes that viewing size as a gradable category “is incommensurable with current popular beliefs about body size... prevalent dominant discourses that are used most often... construct every body that is not considered ‘slender’ automatically as ‘fat’” (p. 3) Thus, in discourses about beauty, the

thin body is the unmarked size, a view that is overwhelmingly seen in popular culture. Accordingly, fat bodies are the marked size. The consequence of marking fatness as aberrant to the norm is entwined in the quotidian routines of Western citizens. That is, fatness in contrast to beauty norms has culminated in a multi-billion-dollar global industry that promises to change fat bodies. The relation between thinness and beauty has especially affected women and girls, resulting in eating disorders and other physical and mental detriments. While men, too, are subjected to scrutiny and prejudice for their size and lifestyle, numerous studies on the intersection of body size and gender (e.g., Bell & McNaughton, 2007; Monaghan, 2005, 2007; Wolf, 1991) show that body size impacts men and women in substantially different ways, chiefly due to the expectations of physical appearance being more acutely fused with a woman's social worth. For men, being too thin is not considered masculine, and positive identities from big male bodies can be constructed far more easily than for women. As Bergman (2009) shows (as cited in van Amsterdam, 2012, p. 5), a man is "just a big dude" or "a cuddly bear" while a woman is "revoltingly fat."

Besides beauty, the view of body size in relation to health also positions the fat body as the marked size. Neoliberal health discourse constructs a fat body as unhealthy and defective. Voices of authority from medicine tell us that body size is controlled by energy consumed (eating) in relation to energy burned (exercise). While not untrue, diet and exercise are hardly the only factors that determine body size. Nonetheless, responsibility of diet and exercise falls on the individual and is viewed as a lifestyle choice (Halse, 2009), thus providing a justification for anti-fat sentiments.

The concepts put forth in obesity discourse are so prevalent that they are understood as truths, as common sense, making the promotion for fat acceptance seem like a Sisyphean task.

Critical commentary points out a paradox how obesity discourse contradicts the neoliberal politics that emphasize consumption. On the one hand, thin bodies are centered and celebrated in fashion, entertainment, and advertising – even advertising for food manufacturers and retailers. On the other hand, food producers, the medical industry, and governmental policies all have a hand in consumers’ increasing body sizes (Brownell & Horgen, 2004). As an example, Richardson and Gelhaus (2015) note that of the dozens of McDonald’s advertisements they examined, not one featured any central characters or restaurant goers that were not thin. Similarly, thin actors are nearly always cast in advertisements for products like sodas and low-cost snacks. The image of thin people as consumers of foods and drinks generally known for negative health effects exposes a paradox: that food industries, *despite* their connection to obesity discourse, devalue fat people in their public messages, thus contributing to the prevalence of fat discrimination. The figurative oil that keeps this cycle going is institutional and commercial promotion of a doctrine of self-control and personal responsibility, a duplicitous claim that consumers can and will educate themselves. Thus, the value of temperance, in the face of ceaseless marketing spectacles, perpetuates the idea that fatness results strictly from lifestyle choices, and constructs thin people as the norm, unmarked group, who take responsibility for their health.

Consequently, fat activism and Fat Studies frequently use the term “thin privilege” in discourses regarding fat stigmatization. Thin privilege “refers to the unjust social advantages that ‘thin’ people receive as a result of the pervasiveness of weight bias and negative attitudes towards fatness” (Nash & Warin, 2017, p. 75). The narrative in fat-positive circles is that thin people are unaware of the advantages they have for their body size, and therefore ignorant of how their own actions and language condone prejudices against fat people, especially fat women

(p. 76). A few examples of thin privilege include: a vast selection of clothing in sizes for thin bodies; lower health insurance rates; ability to eat, buy groceries, and exercise in public without scrutiny of others; having a body shape that is not described in the media as an *epidemic*; or not being denied employment (Ridgeway, 2012). In fat activism, identifying or “calling out” thin privilege is a common method for bringing attention to fat discrimination; however, as Nash and Warin (2017) explain, the fat acceptance community is ambivalent about the term “thin privilege.” Ragen Chastain, a blogger and well-known voice in fat activism says she prefers not to talk about thin privilege because it is an act of “calling out” privilege. Not that pointing out examples of inequality or prejudice is wrong, she says, but because it hinders the progress of fat-positivity and acceptance – objections similar to the ones seen in *man-* and *white-* variants. Furthermore, it can “often lead to a defensive reaction that reinforces the belief that we are trying to challenge, and makes people less likely to want to do anti-oppression work, or you kickstart a round of the ‘Oppression Olympics’ wherein people spend time arguing about who is oppressed more rather than fighting together against oppression” (Chastain, 2012).

The concepts discussed in this section of beauty, health, fat discrimination and thin privilege, and the defensiveness that Chastain warns of regarding thin privilege and the Oppression Olympics – alongside other specific experiences of fat discrimination by way of words from thin speakers (i.e., *thinsplaining*) emerge in the collected texts that are analyzed below.

RQ1a and RQ1b. In the *thinsplain* subset of 142 collected items, 43 texts or co-texts used the word *thinsplain*. This section combines the first two sub-research questions to address how the uses of *thinsplain* in terms of its meta level and the semantic meaning conveyed therein

contribute to the shaping of what *thinsplain* means, how it is used, and how others respond to it upon encountering the word.

To begin, the examples of *thinsplain* used at the metapragmatic (meta¹) level below bring up numerous complex issues such as the fit of clothing on varying body types, and the exposure to online bullying for being fat. In the first two examples, the users only label the language of focus as *thinsplaining* in the tags beneath the post, but their tags serve as metapragmatic commentary on the rest of the post. In (1), the language indexed as *thinsplaining* is an explanation that being fat is a result of a tragedy or of laziness. In (2), the user sarcastically responds to a *thinsplanation* that fat people should hide their bodies. Both posts also use other tags that link the highlighted speech to *fat phobia*, *fat shaming / body shaming*, and *fat discrimination*, effectively supplementing their meaning of *thinsplain* as synonymous, to a certain degree, to the fear and oppression of fat bodies.

- (1) My mom and sister said that people usually become fat when “something bad” happens to them or they “let themselves go”.

Then they told me not to start an argument when I said they were being presumptuous.

#FATPHOBIA #FAT SHAMING #BODY SHAMING #THINSPLAINING #UGH (tum.t.2)

- (2) Ah, yes. Because wearing loose clothes totally hides that a fat person is fat. And expecting fat people to cover up entirely in the heat of the summer is so not inhumane.

#FATPHOBIA #FATDISCRIMINATION #THINSPLAINING (tum.t.1)

Examples (3) and (4) both use *thinsplain* as verbs in the content of their tweet to reference another’s language in a prior tweet. The tweets give a glimpse into experiences in which others speak to fat users in way that indexes *thinsplain* language. The use of *thinsplain* in (3) reacts to another’s explaining a topic, *obesity*, that fat people have for a long time been well-informed. (This tweet and its cotexts are examined more fully in example 13.) Similarly, in (4), the user responds to an ongoing string of tweets in which she interjects that *the usual trolls* have

arrived to refute the actuality of fat users’ experiences. Describing the thinsplainers as *usual trolls*, as well as using a “kineticon”²³ to simulate a non-verbal greeting, *wave*, the author communicates that thinsplaining language is a routinized, familiar experience for fat people talking about body size or health. The use of *thinsplain* here portrays the act of thinsplaining as an everyday, tactless intrusion into discourses that testify the validity of fat discrimination. It denotes the language as agentive, that usurps conversation, redirecting it via pretentious denials of fat stigmatization, seemingly with the intent to send fat activism back into the void of silent self-hatred from which it so insolently emerged.

(3) Listen, I’ve been fat my whole life. Please don’t thinsplain obesity to me. It’s fucking obnoxious. (tw.t.6)

(4) Oh look it’s the usual trolls. Here to thinsplain how our life experience isn’t real. #diagnosisfat *waves* (tw.t.7)

For the semantic function of *thinsplain*, (1) through (4) point out instances in discourse that, to them, are blindered explanations about body size, and therefore self-righteously discriminatory or degrading. No item that included the word *thinsplain* at the meta¹ level expanded or reversed the word’s meaning. But example (5) shows user comments responding to an instance of *thinsplain* in the original post, although the users never actually repeat the word:

(5) ⇕ SKITL: I wonder how they’d react if we called all of their “oppression” fatsplaining
 ⇕ OJ: They’d obviously react by taking to social media and blowing up Tumblr, Twitter, Sundry other blogs, & Facebook with poorly written and argued diatribes whining among their insular community of Losers, accomplishing precisely fuckall in the process.
 ⇕ SKIT Of course, because only oppressed people can have L: an opinion
 ⇕ QWK: And what would then be the definition of fatsplainin
 ⇕ NLE: Spewing forth fatlogic to try and justify their lifestyle choices? (red.t.3)

²³ See *richsplain* example 7, pp. 176; Lyons, 2018.

The first comment of the thread, by SKITL, denies acknowledging the legitimacy of the word, as well as the existence of fat oppression. Even though SKITL did not use *thinsplain*, the comment communicates a retaliation against the word – a “reverse” meaning – notably by the inclusion of *fatsplaining* in the comment. Like the semantic reversals in *mansplain* and *whitesplain*, appropriating *thinsplain* and its meaning and reaffixing it with *fat-*, the user states that fat people can also *fatsplain*, thus supporting the argument that *thinsplain* is not a worthwhile term. He evaluates *thinsplaining* as an offence, posing a question that essentially asks, “how would they like it if we did that to them,” thus positioning themselves as innocent actors in an ordinary discussion about weightloss, and “them,” the fat activists, as unjust and unwarranted language police. The decision to put *oppression* in scare quotes is a metasemantic act, simultaneously mimicking another’s contextual usage of the word and implicitly communicating a disparity between the function of the word in the text, and its usual definition. Thus, the comment conveys the perspective that fat people are not an oppressed group. Additionally, referring to fat speakers’ language as *fatsplaining*, the user undermines the macro-level power imbalance between the two categories of fat or thin. The other comments on the thread agree with SKITL’s in various ways: OJ’s comment is a cross-platform, metadiscursive evaluation of the genre of fat activist and body positive discourses, invalidating this category of language as *poorly written*, *diatribes*, and *whining*, too rampant to avoid, and completely pointless. NLE confirms the outlook that fat activist discourse is invalid because the so-called oppression is simply due to one’s own lifestyle choices.

The next group of examples show some variations of how the word is used meta-metapragmatically and what semantic value is communicated therein. First, the results of coding for the meta-level of *thinsplain* uses in the dataset are presented in Table 8. The distribution of

how *thinsplain* is used across the three SNS reveals that 60% of the time, *thinsplain* is part of the linguistic message of the SNS post/comment. Metasemantic references to *thinsplain* occurred 40% of the time. Like *richsplain*, there were no instances of a meta³pragmatic usage.

Table 8: *Meta-levels of uses across platforms – RQ1a for thinsplain*

THIN	1			2			3		
	texts	co-texts	total	texts	co-texts	total	texts	co-texts	total
Twitter	9	1	10	1	0	1	0	0	0
Reddit	5	5	10	0	13	13	0	0	0
Tumblr	6	0	6	1	2	3	0	0	0
Total	20	6	26	2	15	17	0	0	0

The table also shows that most of the instances of *thinsplain* in the first category – where the word is used as part of the content for its linguistic meaning – are the retrieved texts (20 of 26, or 77%) – even if the retrieved texts were not the original tweet, post, or blog. Most of the corresponding co-texts that use *thinsplain* are in the second group, comprising 15 of 17 (88%). The categorization demonstrates, therefore, a pattern in how users employ *thinsplain* in the content of their post or comment: users call attention to a portion of ongoing language by metapragmatically marking it as *thinsplain*ing, thus prompting other users to comment on the word. This way of using and talking about the word is similar to *richsplain*, another lesser-known *splain* word. In contrast, the linguistic and metalinguistic uses of *mansplain* – as well as *whitesplain*, albeit to a lesser extent – show a different story of metapragmatic developments in dialogues containing meta¹ and meta² usages. That is, of all the instances in which users insert *thinsplain* into the content of their message, most of them are retrieved texts (the items in the dataset found from the keyword search). In other words, users do not necessarily employ *thinsplain* as a verb nearly as frequently in comparison to the other three *splain* words.

For example, a post on the subreddit r/fatlogic recalls a hair dresser’s conversation with a client who spoke about a recent miscarriage and blamed her body weight for the loss of her child. At the end of her post, the user writes: *Don’t fucking thinsplain shit to me. I really don’t care about your opinion! Thanks!* In this retrieved text, *thinsplain* functions to manage prospective comments from others about weight and health. The subsequent comments from others on the post use *thinsplain* metasemantically (and in this post, collectively laughing at the word):

(6) “Thinsplain?”

AV1: Just add it to everything Thinsplain, thinagressions, the thintriarchy, the thin gaze.

B08: Don’t forget ‘thintriggered’! Should that be trigGIRTHed?;

CA7: ‘Post-Thinsplaining-Stress-Disorder?’ *(red.t.1)*

I will point out that the post’s story of the miscarriage was nearly 200 words in length, with *thinsplain* occurring only once at the end. Yet of the 20 collected co-texts (i.e., the 20 most up-voted comments on the subreddit post), only the 19th comment addressed the story; the rest all focused on the usage of *thinsplain* at the bottom of the original post. Considering the affordance on Reddit which allows users to “upvote” and “downvote” comments, the fact that 19 of the 20 most upvoted comments addressed the word *thinsplain* shows the power of *splain* words to capture users’ attention and prompt discussions about the word and what it may mean.

Returning to the trend mentioned above, there is a pattern in which a single use of *thinsplain* to point to unacceptable language frequently leads to plentiful metasemantic co-texts. The pattern suggests that for *thinsplain* on SNS, its usage may typically be somewhat of a curve ball in an ongoing discourse: whether its usage is viewed as a fatuous or impertinent disruption, or as an opportune act of discursive and linguistic wit, the data show that the mere appearance of *thinsplain* is often sufficient to derail the conversation about “X” (at least for some users and/or

for some time) to focus instead on the word *thinsplain*, on opinions of the word, and suspicions about what it is doing in language.

While similar numbers appear on the meta-level table (Table 6) for *richsplain*, and even *whitesplain* (Table 4), *thinsplain* is set apart by virtue of the social category to which it refers. This is not to say that body size is not a hotly discussed topic of social justice on SNS. Rather, it is a reflection of the discord in body size discourses, convoluted by the fact that body size is gradable, instable, and arbitrary depending on its cultural context and intersection with other social categories. Gender, race, and social class are, for the most part, fixed categories²⁴ over which individuals are seen to hold little control. Consequently, disputing the *splain* terms for those categories requires more careful discursive stepping. Open expression of contempt for voices from fat bodies is much easier, given anti-fat 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.

Instances of *thinsplain* usage at the meta²pragmatic level reveal users' definitions of the word, or users' reactions to it when they encounter its usage elsewhere in the Webosphere. Examples (7) through (10) show the users' semantic understandings. The meanings are categorically similar, all referencing a thin person's way of speaking to a fat person, but the users focus on a different aspect of the various experiences embodied in the word: in (7), *thinsplaining* is speaking platitudes and not listening to fat people. Example (8) addresses incorrectly correcting fat speakers on topics they would likely have more firsthand experience of.

²⁴ This is not to say that one cannot move between the social categories of gender, class, or race, e.g., from poor to rich, from male to female (nor other social categories, like sexuality, that are not of focus in the current study). However, unlike axes like age, changing one's gender, race, or social class would no doubt require a great deal of resources, and an enormous dedication of time and effort (Elg & Jensen, 2012; van Anderson, 2012).

- (7) Thinsplaining – When thin people tell you “you’re overweight and it’s not good for your health” as if you don’t know and haven’t heard that 1,000,000,000,000 times already.
#OBESITY #OVERWEIGHT #OBESE (tw.t.10)
- (8) Admittedly this is gonna sound “mega cringe” but I’m coining the word “thinsplain” for when a skinny person who only has an 8th grade biology understand of the human body tries to explain to someone with a health disorder that makes their weight loss difficult is “wrong” without giving any evidence that isn’t heavily biased or flat out not true.
#FATPHOBIA (tum.t.3)
- (9) thinsplaining is when a skinny person tell you all about their woes that we already know about only to invalidate your problems. After whining about how oppressed they are they go back to eating whatever they want and not gaining a pound. (red.t.5)
- (10) Oy. Time to thinsplain? There’s how one feels on the inside (which is heavily influenced by cultural “norms”) & there’s how fat people are treated. I won’t argue with anyone abt internal experiences at various weight, but as a fat person I KNOW I’ve been harmed by fat hatred. (tw.t.1)

Lastly, (9) and (10) show thinsplaining as hijacking the conversation away from fat speakers to talk about their own body-image problems, revealing their “thin privilege,” i.e., their unawareness that their personal body-size problems do not overflow into the social and institutional spheres. Example (10) indirectly defines *thinsplain*, referencing the difference between the personal and the social and institutional spheres of privilege and oppression. She clarifies that she means not to argue about *internal experiences at various weights*, recognizing that body size is a gradable and fluctuating circumstance, and that her intention is not to contradict the experiences of others, but simply to have her perspective invited into the larger discourse. In essence, she has given a disclaimer, i.e., a reflexive assessment of her own forthcoming comment, in order to manage the interpretation of her argument and potential misinterpretation or reactive replies to her tweet. The discourse management continues in communicating her epistemic access to the topic, *as a fat person*, before imparting the contradiction to the thinsplaining language: *I KNOW I’ve been harmed by fat hatred*. This user

chose not “to @” i.e., to directly reply to the other user to whom she was responding, so the context of the thinsplaining is unknown. However, there is addressivity (Bakhtin, 1986) in her response to another’s language in her tweet, which suggests, like many other items examined above, that someone might have denied the severity, or the existence all together, of fat discrimination. Thus, despite the absence of surrounding context, the tweet still communicates the author’s encounter with another speaker who wrongly explained the experience of being fat in a society that glorifies thin bodies.

The issue with body size is more complicated, though. In some uses of *thinsplain*, a shift in linguistic authority occurs, that is, situations in which thin people say they can talk about body size, and when fat people are told they cannot. In example (11), the “thin-to-fat” direction of the language is expanded upon when a thin person who was once fat claims her authority to speak about weight loss, without it being called *thinsplaining*:

- (11) [...] i was obese last year and lost 70 pounds. training for a half marathon. if i hear ONE motherfucker say to me that is thin privilege, I’m choking them. i’m grabbing it by the throat and squeezing until it stops making sounds. I EARNED IT.

i will help anyone and show them how i lost the weight [...] but it is not thinsplaining (not to try and gloat) it’s a decent thing to do for someone who lost weight to help others who might be trying to do the same thing. (*red.t.2*)

- (12) A: [REPLYING TO A TWEET BY @B ABOUT FATPHOBIA²⁵ IN WHICH SHE MENTIONS HER WEIGHT]

“I’m 200lbs” lol bitch sit entirely the fuck down

B: there’s a lot of people that weight 200lbs or less and have experienced a lot of disgusting fatmisia²⁶. this looks like gate keeping to me.

A: I think smallfats who can’t address their privilege are a problem for myself and for ssbbw [SUPER-SIZED BIG BEAUTIFUL WOMEN]

²⁵ *Fatphobia* refers to a dislike or fear of fat people (Stryker, 2017).

²⁶ *Fatmisia* is a very newly coined term that refers to the assumption that all fat people are unhealthy (CrankyAustistic, 2017)

A: I mean tbh [TO BE HONEST] I find it frustrating when smallfats center themselves over fats who experience inarguably worse treatment

B: You don't need to equate them. just please don't exclude us... I am aware that I have a certain amount of privilege.

A: Then don't thinsplain to those of us who don't have those same privileges, it is ENTIRELY unwelcome (tw.t.4)

In (12), another issue comes up: when the voices of smaller fat people are perceived to be speaking for all fat people. This implies that certain experiences of fatness have more value in fat acceptance discourse. In the exchange between two Twitter users the claim is made that some aspects of thin privilege are extended to so-called “small fats,” and that therefore small fats’ speaking on fat experiences is also problematic. This sheds light on the fact that unlike other social categories that one perceives as being more clearly defined, that one’s size is perceived to be gradable on a range, and can change easily and for many reasons.

This section has examined 12 (co)texts from the three platforms to discuss how the different meta-levels of *thinsplain* shape discussions on body-size language and how the meaning of *thinsplain* is shaped by users’ advancing, challenging, or distorting the word to reflect their evaluation of the word itself, as well as the macro-level discourses on body-size in which it appears.

RQ1c and RQ1d: Pragmatics and metapragmatics. In this subsection, I demonstrate some specific methods of users to index language as *thinsplaining* and to manage how their own language is conveyed.

In example (14), the Twitter user portrays a conversation between “thin girl” and herself, using a hypothetical dialogue to demonstrate her complaint about patterns she has noticed in how thin girls speak to fat girls:

(14) THIN GIRL: oh no I'm gaining weight, I'm so ugly and fat

ME:

THIN_GIRL: omg no you're not fat and you're so hot. I just meant for me my body is changing

ME:

THIN_GIRL: *continues to thinsplain* (tw.t.2)

As Vásquez and Creel (2017) note about Tumblr imaginary “chat posts” – i.e., “brief, imagined dialogues, posted by a single user” (p. 59) – the author creates a hypothetical interaction to narrate a relatable first-hand situation in order to exhibit her experience. In this post, the interaction is between the user and THIN GIRL, a speaker that possibly represents the voices of multiple thin girls, in order to portray a perceived linguistic pattern in her past exchanges. The dialogue uses “ventriloquism,” (Cooren, 2010), showing how she sees thin girls complaining about gaining weight, which makes them feel *ugly and fat*. The user’s response in the constructed dialogue is silence, shown in the tweet by an absence of text for her turn in the dialogue. THIN GIRL’s responds to the silence, causing a realization that her grievance was inappropriate, given the ostensive physical size of the Twitter user. The realization elicits an attempt from THIN GIRL to repair the credibility of her complaint. Addressing her silent interlocutor’s size: *you’re not fat and you’re so hot*, she attempts to clarify what she did *not* mean to imply, she inadvertently points out the size difference between herself and her interlocutor. Thus, THIN GIRL’S comment ultimately exemplifies the experience that the Twitter user wishes to point out as a relatable frustration: a tendency of some thin girls to complain about their weight when they should not, or at least not to other girls who have a more significant experience of fatness.

Furthermore, by way of the metapragmatic term *thinsplain*, as well as asterisks that serve to paraphrase THIN GIRL’S speech (*continues to thinsplain*), the user’s post makes further

reference to THIN GIRLS' way of talking about body size in a way that is inconsiderate or oblivious to the experiences of fat girls. The last line of dialogue shows that even after THIN GIRL might have realized her complaint is inappropriate to say to the other girl; she continues her attempt to justify her laments, which is labelled *thinsplaining*. The usage of *thinsplain* allows the tweet to concisely mark such language as insensitive for its perceived ignorance of the realities and struggles fat girls, and therefore a condescending way for people of different physical shapes to speak to one another. In sum, the strategies help make her point that thin girls (1) focus on their own body image issues, unaware of the experiences of fat girls, and that (2), this is a run-of-the-mill interaction for fat girls, shown in the silence and the usage of *thinsplain* in her turns of the dialogue. Similar to the tweet presented previously in (4), the users convey an eye-rolling "here we go again" sentiment.

Similarly, example (15) is a tweet in which the user points out another's language as inappropriate, "Yeah, no. I expect assholes like you to keep using fat stigmatizing language..." He continues, "The obsessive need to denounce fat people as 'diseased' is EXACTLY why allies don't support us when they use 'obese' or 'overweight'." This tweet provides evidence for the change in how self-described fat people want to be referred to, and how they are reclaiming the word 'fat.' They find 'obese' and 'overweight' to be problematic for their connection to a disease or problem in general. The user continues to denounce the use of 'obese' or 'overweight' as a way to shame fat people, and as an experience that fat people know all too well, as expressed in his sarcastic comment, "Cuz I've never heard that before. HOW GRACIOUS OF THEM." The user finalizes his point through a constructed quote from so-called *thinsplainers*:

- (15) "I would thinsplain why you are diseased, but you very rudely weren't ashamed to be fat, so what's the point." FUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK YOU.
(*tw.t.5*)

The Twitter user mimics thin people's comments to fat people, in which the thin speakers define their own language as *thinsplaining*. By use of quotation marks to reference their language as *thinsplaining*, the user metapragmatically denounces such language as a presumption-cum-error regarding matters of health. The fabricated remark also serves as a metacommentary on the effect of such condescending thin explanations, showing that shaming fat people for their size due to its alleged link to disease is a common method for the justification of discriminating against fat people. Further, the user illustrates that for a fat person to be unashamed of their size is disruptive to the patterns in the mainstream discourses of obesity, as the thinsplainer condemns the fat person for "very rudely" not being ashamed of his size. The disdain towards and rejection of obesity discourse is strongly punctuated by the user's follow-up comment, a visually heightened and elongated "fuck you" through the use of capitalization and letter repetition.

Similar to example (12) where the voices of *smallfats* are shut down by a purported deficiency in experiences of discrimination, in the dialogues of fat acceptance and fat activism also exists in the disputes between those who promote a hardline stance of fat pride and those who were once fat and are now thin. This additional category of body size further complicates the question of who can say what, and to whom, and in what context, when it comes to experiences of weight, health, and identity, illustrating one of many complexities in understanding privilege, normativity, and discrimination between individuals who all want their voice to be heard. In other words, which experiences of fatness are more valid than others, and why?

Concluding remarks on thinsplain. In the *thinsplain* subset of 142 items, the majority of the texts used the word in context, i.e., to call out an instance of thinsplaining. The topics of

conversation surrounding the word shed light on issues that Fat Studies and movements like fat activism aim to bring to light, namely the ways that fat people are discriminated against and how the prejudice against larger-bodied people is not an issue that is talked about or taken seriously in wider contexts. 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 met with hostility. Language around *thinsplain* reveal an unawareness amongst many thin folks to the personal, social, and institutional struggles of fat people, ultimately revealing that there is a disparity in what are thought to be basic, shared freedoms and abilities in life.

Comparison of the Four Words

Comparing the findings for each *splain* highlights some similarities and differences that are worth noting. First, the results of RQ1a for each *splain* revealed that for all four words, a higher percentage of uses were categorized at the meta¹ level than the meta² level. However, a closer analysis of how the meta-level of texts contrasted with the co-texts showed that for *whitesplain*, and more noticeably for *richsplain*, and *thinsplain*, there was a pattern of most retrieved texts being categorized as meta¹ and most co-texts being meta². What this suggests is that one user writes a post/tweet using *white-*, *rich-*, or *thinsplain* in context, prompting other users to respond with their opinion about the new word they had just encountered for the first time. Conversely, the analysis found that in the *mansplain* dataset, there were no instances in which users directly expressed an unfamiliarity with the word. Moreover, in the subsection “Interdiscursivity of *[x]splain*” on page 111, I showed how users inferred the meaning of *white-*, *rich-*, or *thinsplain* by drawing parallels with *mansplain*. Therefore, these findings support the claim that *mansplain* is recognized by citizen sociolinguists as the original term that paved the

way for other social groups to be examined. In reappropriating the *-splain* root from *mansplain*, users not only make it possible to discuss problems in linguistic practices involving race, class, and body size (and any other group), but it shows that users must find the *-splain* root a useful tool for identifying and enregistering certain ways of talking.

From the analysis of RQ1b, the chapter also showed that, of the four *splains* of focus, there is hardly any variation in the meaning of *richsplain*, and only a few instances of *thinsplain*'s original definition being adapted and reappropriated. *Whitesplain* and *mansplain*, however, is frequently redefined to reverse the victimization of whose voices are ignored, from POC to Whites and from women to men, respectively. Among these two, *mansplain* is the most disputed in terms of what it means or does not mean. This is likely due, to some extent, to *mansplain*'s prominence in longer lifespan and frequency of usage in SNS, as discussed above, especially in comparison to the much lesser-known *thin- and richsplain*. However, *whitesplain* – while not as known as *mansplain* – also enjoys far more familiarity and frequency of use in SNS discourse. That is, *mansplain* and *whitesplain* are significantly more popular than *richsplain* and *thinsplain* (see Appendix A). Additionally, findings for RQ1b revealed that users only suggest other words or denounce the legitimacy of the *splains* with *man-* and *white-*, which aligns with the fact that gender and race are hotly debated topics in today's tumultuous sociopolitical climate. Between *man-* and *white-*, users are much more careful in denouncing *whitesplain* than *mansplain*. That is, comments expressing disdain for *whitesplain* mainly made the broader argument that “made-up words” are not helpful to productive conversation about race. Anti-*mansplain* comments, however, were far less likely to mitigate their arguments with flagrant anti-feminist remarks and vulgar wordplay for women and women's language. The difference here between *man-* and *whitesplain* may speak to the way gender imbalances are viewed in

society; while *whitesplaining* could potentially mark a speaker as racially insensitive, a signifier that is frowned upon quite seriously in mainstream society, a man being accused of speaking arrogantly to women would probably carry less of a social burden in many discourse communities.

Overall, one similarity between the words' usage is the various ways that citizen sociolinguists employ pragmatic meanings in their discussions of *[x]splain* and make use of their metapragmatic awareness to call attention to a piece of language, regardless of whether it was uttered by themselves or by someone else, or whether their sentiments towards the *splain* word is positive or negative. Overall, these terms are in themselves objects with which users merge their sociopolitical beliefs with their own personal characteristics, and justify their outlook on the realities of the four social categories. The four *splain* words create a demarcation of who has access to the most authentic experience and therefore epistemic ownership of a way of talking. Users employ these terms to make statements about who can speak as a legitimate member of a social group and how they can or cannot speak, and they do so by presenting their reasoning as self-evident.

Summary and Discussion of Chapter

All in all, the dialogues show that there is a frustration that the *splain* discourses have in common: users feel a frequent frustration that they are misjudged by others, assumed to have no knowledge of a topic, their voices are assumed unworthy of attention, or their experiences are not important. The speakers who are accused of *splain* language also frequently express a similar frustration: that because of their unmarked position in social categories, that they are misjudged as intolerant, or are at least unjustly censored or silenced. These words thus make divisions between who is or is not entitled to speak as a legitimate owner of an experience.

Another important theme to note is the role of scale. The analyses showed how users' language – be it linguistic play, or linguistic labor – is constantly negotiated between the macro and micro level scales of language in relation to social categories and experiences. Thus, a discussion about, for example, a scarcity of fashionwear for larger bodies, fluctuates between micro-scale utterances about clothing sizes, and the macro implications of fat discrimination and/or thin privilege. As a result, it is valuable to investigate the ways people talk about language in relation to how they identify with social groups in order to understand how language use, expedited by the affordances of digital communication, can reveal about the linguistic practices and social ideologies and their intersections with individual and collective views of the world.

CHAPTER FIVE: RQ2 FINDINGS

This chapter addresses the second research question which asks, “How do the meanings and uses of the *splain* words presented in RQ1 vary across Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr?” The reason for investigating this question was based on the fact that user demographics and the technological affordances and limitations of different SNS can influence the ways in which people connect and interact on the sites. By comparing what users in each site do with the *splain* words, and how they do it, this chapter aims to demonstrate how sociopragmatic norms can be influenced by the writing space in which they occur.

First, as discussed in Chapter 3, there are some striking differences in user demographics between Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr. The most noteworthy is the high concentration of young, White males on Reddit (Barthel et al, 2016). Ideas about what is the “typical” user of varying platforms, and the consequential discursive practices that subsequently stand out can be seen in the multimodal posts and comments across the platforms. For example, a Reddit post (Figure 20) shared an image from the film *The Breakfast Club*, where archetypal high school cliques, e.g. *preps, geeks, jocks, rebels*, are shown to represent the personalities of popular SNS. Twitter is symbolized by an antagonistic and aggressive character, perhaps an appropriate representation considering digital research characterizes Twitter discourses as sites for negativity and aggression, given the impulsive nature of tweets that are short and quickly buried amongst the other millions of daily tweets (Marwick, 2010). Tumblr is represented by the reclusive “basket case” who is quiet but also prone to impulsive and angry outbursts. Considering Tumblr’s success may be partly “because it is the anti-blog,” because many Tumblr users do not want a

widely public audience, only to be connected with a few close friends (Rifkin, 2013). Reddit is not represented in the image, but a redditor’s comment on the post says, *Then what about Reddit? The janitor?* This may refer to the moderators on subreddits, users who manage the content and can take out the trash, so to speak, or remove content that disobeys the rules set by the subreddit.



Figure 21: SNS stereotypes portrayed by film characters

In five of the texts collected for this study, users referenced linguistic patterns or user qualities of a certain SNS. One Tumblr user referenced an anti-feminist community on Reddit (addressed more fully in Example 6 of this section), and the other four were Reddit users alluding to Tumblr bloggers and their practices, usually with ridicule or contempt, and almost always in regard to “made-up words” (also presented below). This aligns with previous research on Tumblr as a site for creativity and encouragement for users’ self-expression (e.g., Bourlai & Herring, 2014; Connelly, 2015; Kanai, 2015). Below I take a more detailed look at the data to present how social practices on the three SNS may be influenced by the technological design and the social structure amongst the platform’s users.

To answer this research question, I examined each SNS with how the *splains* were classified by the linguistic function and semantic value in RQ1a and RQ1b. I organized the meta-level category data by platform, and then I looked at different meanings that users bestowed on the *splains* for each platform. Achieving a clear taxonomy of how users on each SNS use [x]*splain* and/or talk about [x]*splain*, was complicated by the fact that there are four different *splain* words, and that, for instance, two different user comments might talk about the word with identical or polarized viewpoints on the word. Consequently, I present three tables below that aim to succinctly present the differences in what the *splain* words are doing in the different SNS, and the overall attitudes amongst both the individual texts/co-texts, as well as within the entire discourse. Below I explain this more fully.

Starting with the “meta level” that RQ1a addresses, I coded the texts and co-texts using the categories shown in Table 9. The task of coding for the meta level was usually straightforward: I determined whether the word was functioning syntactically in the utterance, if it was an object of discussion, or if it was doing both simultaneously. Definitions and examples are shown in Table 9:

Table 9: Coding specifics and examples for RQ1a

Meta-level	1	2	3
	Metapragmatic	Meta-metapragmatic	Meta-meta-metapragmatic / meta ³ pragmatic or more
Definition	Used to function as a message (the content being communicated). Includes definitions of the word.	Functions as linguistic code; meta-semantic language on a meta-pragmatic word is doubly-metapragmatic	Talks about an instance of a doubly-metapragmatic use of the word
Examples	<i>"He tried to mansplain physics to her, knowing she's an astronaut"</i>	<i>"I thought mansplaining was only when a man was explaining womanly things"</i>	<i>"A man mansplained to me I was not using the term mansplain correctly"</i>
	<i>"Don't thinsplain to me about fat shaming"</i>	<i>"Is whitesplain racist?"</i>	<i>"I especially love when white folks whitesplain why using the word whitesplain is racist."</i>

The results of the coding for RQ1 are presented in Table 10, which shows the linguistic function of how the *splains* were used in all of the texts and co-texts of the entire dataset, for all four *splain* words. The words of focus were not used in all of the collected co-texts; this table represents only the retrieved texts, and the co-texts that also included the *splain*. So for example, in the *mansplain* subset, there were 263 items from all three sites (from 22 retrieved texts and 241 accompanying co-texts; see Table 1, p. 90). Among those 263 units of language, 96 included a variant of the word *mansplain* at least once. As explained in Chapter 4, I coded each usage for its “meta level” to address RQ1a, and I discuss the cross-platform differences below.

Table 10: RQ1a meta-level – splains combined

Meta level	Twitter	Reddit	Tumblr	Total
	%	%	%	%
1	59%	32%	38%	55%
2	39%	63%	59%	42%
3	2%	5%	3%	3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

As Table 10 shows, there are visible differences in the linguistic function of the *splain* words depending on the platform. Most noticeable, on Reddit and Tumblr, the majority of the time when posts or comments included a *splain*, it was to talk about the word, as illustrated by the examples in Figures 23 and 24. In contrast, on Twitter, most of the *splain* uses functioned as part of the linguistic message, usually as a verb, like the tweet in Figure 22. Based on this data, it is clear that on Reddit and Tumblr, there is more of a tendency to talk about *splain* words; whereas *splains* are much more likely to be used for their semantic values on Twitter.

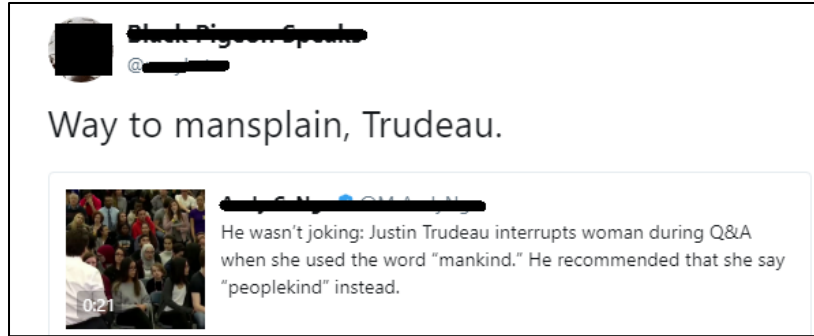


Figure 22: Using mansplain in the linguistic message on Twitter (twit.m.9)

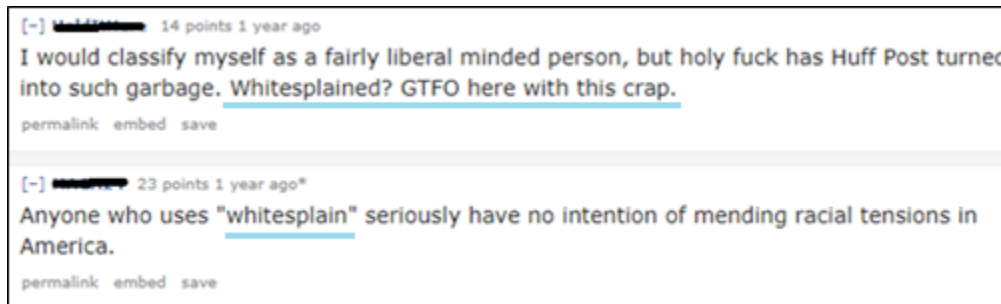


Figure 23: Whitesplain in the linguistic code on Reddit (red.w.1)

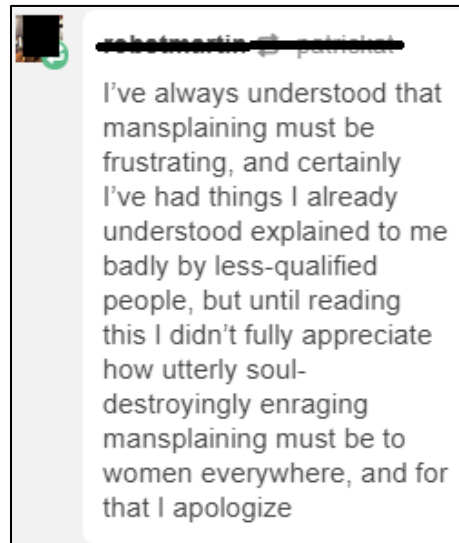


Figure 24: Mansplain as an object of language (tum.m.4)

The suggestions of this finding are twofold. Firstly, there is a higher degree of metalinguistic awareness in Reddit and Tumblr discourse. While meanings of neologisms are less likely to be disputed on Twitter, the users of Reddit and Tumblr show a more eager proclivity to seize the sort of opportunity that *splain* words provide to influence the conversation.

For instance, deliberate attempts to dispute the legitimacy of a *splain* word or to reiterate what it does or does not mean are more numerous on Reddit and Tumblr. And those metalinguistic conversations show that ultimately, users of Reddit and Tumblr have a higher awareness of the power of language and how instrumental the usage and meanings of words can be in promoting, preserving, or transforming social ideologies.

The second implication is that Reddit and Tumblr are more dialogic in nature than Twitter. That is, in comparison to Tumblr and especially Reddit, the dynamics of Twitter lend less capacity for back-and-forth conversations to be visualized on a user's computer or mobile screen. While it is possible to display a string of tweets that form a dialogue, Twitter is set to primarily display individual tweets that stand alone on a user's page or their feed. The identifying quality of tweets is their concise and ephemeral nature, as opposed to lengthy blog-like texts of other SNS. On Tumblr as well, users typically reblog a post, and, like on Twitter, that post is resituated on another Tumblr blog. However, Tumblr also allows users to comment through one of the "notes" features on posts, wherein more of a dialogue between users can occur – and more importantly, where the co-texts for this study were gathered. Figure 24 provides a visual of how users can engage in a dialogue with one another through comments in the notes section of a Tumblr blog, with the symbol (👤) marking where users respond to others:

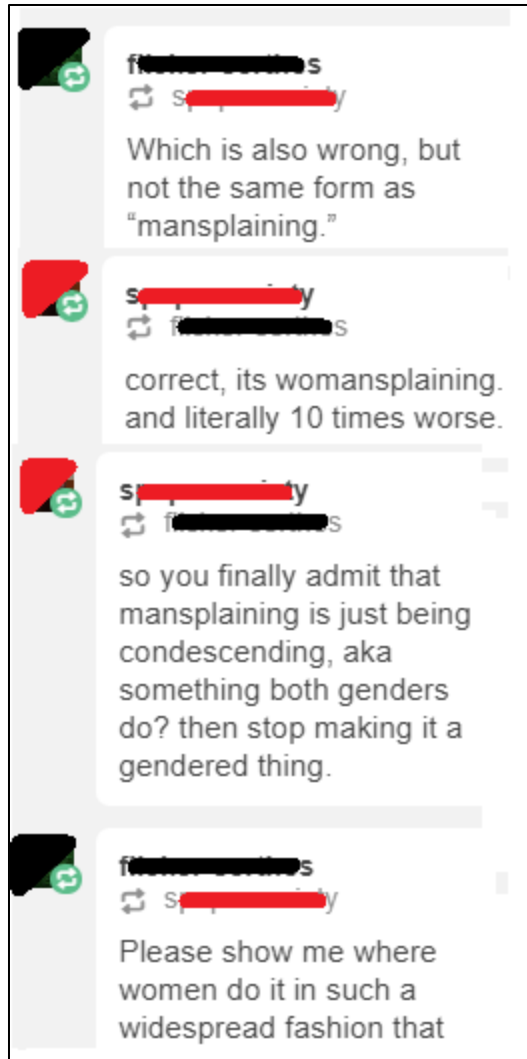


Figure 25: Dialogism on Tumblr

In terms of the dialogic quality of each SNS platform, Reddit is the SNS that promotes the most conversational interaction between users with threaded dialogues, allowing any number of conversations to branch out in their own direction. As an example, Figure 25, which is a screenshot from Reddit that shows two comments on the original post, with each comment receiving at least one reply. (The content is not the focus here; the intention of Figure 25 is only to illustrate how conversational threading is visualized on Reddit.) Other users can choose to reply to any comment, to any reply to a comment, or to any reply to a reply, and so on. The ability to thread – or to contain conversations within a confined part of the comment section –

thus affords users with the capacity to discuss any elements of the original post, and/or any points or side notes brought up in the comments section. Tangential conversations are able to branch out; conversely, it is also a simple task for users who want to see, for instance, only the comments related to the original post.

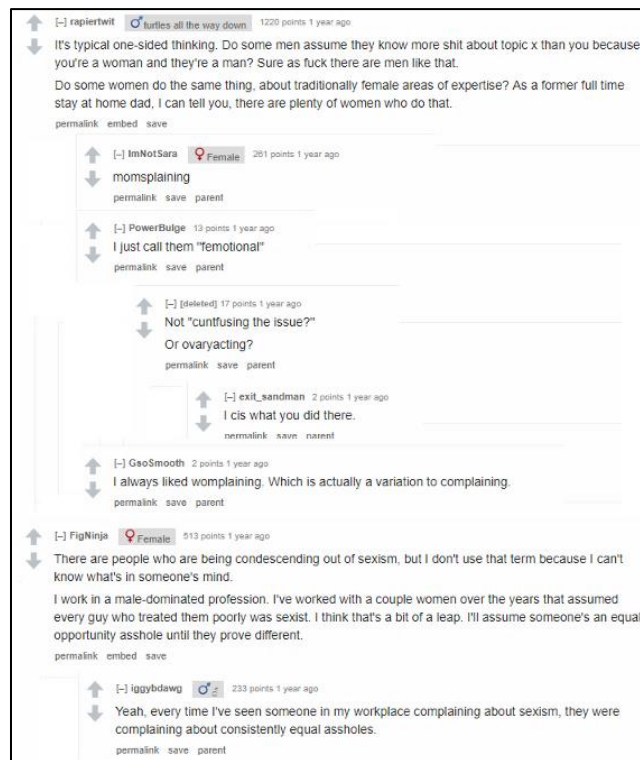


Figure 26: Comment threading on Reddit

The linguistic function of the *splains* only reveal, though, that on Reddit and Tumblr it is more likely for the discourses to be about the words, but of course that does not tell us *how* users' discussions of the words differ, if at all, across platforms. The findings from RQ1b, however, uncover some cross-platform variations. Table 11 presents the categorization of the semantic value for each retrieved tweet or post, alongside any collected co-texts that also used the *splain* word. For the second RQ, I considered whether the *splain* was used or discussed favorably or disdainfully. For example, in this tweet, "*Thinsplainers feigning concern for fat people's health to cover their disdain...*" the word is used in a way that aligns with the main

definition of contemptuous language from thin folks about body-size issues. The second category is for when users talk about *splain* words being problematic in some way, e.g., ‘Whitesplaining’ similar to ‘mansplaining’ a term used to shame men or white people into submission instead of allowing them to speak...” (red.m.10). Additionally, I categorized uses in the “reverse” category when users distort the meaning for their own social perspective. For example, this Reddit comment said, “Obsessed with racism. When are they going to realize using words like whitesplain every time a white person opens their mouth, that makes them racist.” This user rejects the validity of *whitesplain* and redefines the term as a tool used to silence White people on race-related topics. Instances in which users employed the word but its meaning according to the author is unclear, I categorized as “unclear”.

Table 11: *Splain meaning value in texts and co-texts across platforms*

Twitter	mansplain		whitesplain		richsplain		thinsplain		total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Accepts main definition	15	60%	14	45%	12	80%	15	94%	63	65%
Reverses/expands meaning	7	28%	12	39%	1	7%	0	0%	33	34%
Unclear	3	12%	5	16%	2	13%	1	6%	1	1%
Total	25	100%	31	100%	15	100%	16	100%	97	100%
Reddit	mansplain		whitesplain		richsplain		thinsplain		total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Accepts	9	30%	4	20%	15	88%	14	64%	42	47%
Reverses/expands meaning	18	60%	12	60%	0	0%	6	27%	36	40%
Unclear	3	10%	4	20%	2	12%	2	9%	11	12%
Total	30	100%	20	100%	17	100%	22	100%	89	100%
Tumblr	mansplain		whitesplain		richsplain		thinsplain		total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Accepts	23	68%	15	83%	19	83%	12	92%	69	73%
Reverses/expands meaning	8	24%	6	33%	1	4%	0	0%	15	16%
Unclear	3	9%	2	11%	3	13%	1	20%	9	9%

Table 11 shows that across platforms, users’ view of the *splain* words is considerably different, with the primary meaning implied nearly two-thirds of the time on Twitter and over

three-fourths of the time on Tumblr. Conversely on Reddit, *splains* are noticeably less well-received. The highlighted cells are the ones for each word that has the highest percentage in that category. Interestingly, on Twitter and Tumblr, the majority of all uses occur in a way that recognizes the primary definition. However, for Reddit the distribution is rather striking, showing it is not necessarily all *splain* words in general that become targets of metalinguistic scorn, just the two that address gender and race.

This finding seems to align with what some previous research on the user demographics and subsequent discursive practices of Tumblr and Reddit. Specifically, redditors are more likely to be 18 to 29-year-old males, making up 67% of regularly-active accounts (Pew Research, 2016); and of those young men, they are predominantly white (Sattenberg, 2018). It is true that some discussions of *mansplain* and *whitesplain* were *splain*-supportive and a space for redditors to share their personal stories, those happened in specific subreddits: r/BlackLadies and r/AskWomen. However, outside of those enclosures, the white-male dominance on Reddit is certainly observable in my data, which I attend to in the following paragraphs.

The discourse from the *Silicon Valley* “mansplaining mansplain” post (*red.m.4*; discussed in Chapter 4) was posted in r/Funny, a subreddit that has no specific target audience and nearly 23 million subscribers. One of the most noteworthy affordances that differentiates Reddit from Twitter and Tumblr is its upvote/downvote system. On the post about *mansplain* in r/Funny, 20 co-texts were collected. The first (top) 17 comments were mostly categorized as rejecting the notion of *mansplain*, (like *ya could just call them condescending and leave out the sexism*) with a few in the ‘unknown’ category (such as *well ackchyually...*). Only the last comment in the 20 co-texts voiced a different opinion: *yeah but people non-stop assume they know more than any woman. Most guys’ masculinity can’t take a woman being smarter than them so they*

overcompensate by belittling and mansplaining... This comment had a “karma” score – difference of upvotes and downvotes – of negative 25, showing the representative opinion of the other users in that reddit. Reddit’s upvote/downvote system also applies to comments within threads of comments; therefore, the top replies to that comment also echo which viewpoints are the most valued amongst those users. And the top reply opposes the comment with the argument that it is used *to make blanket statements about entire groups of people*. Similar views are expressed in most of the reddit posts, particularly in the *mansplain* and *whitesplain* data, e.g. *oh god, are we adding more criteria to the oppression olympics?* and *Jesus, I’m a white dude...At this point it seems like I’m not allowed to speak to anyone*.

Like Reddit, the user demographics of Tumblr play a considerable role in the practices and character of the SNS. Research reports that women make up slightly more than half of Tumblr users (Pew Research, 2016). However, Tumblr is known to be a space that supports marginalized groups and where users can express avant-garde views (Connelly, 2015). It is common on Tumblr for users to include in their biographies information like their sexual orientation, gender identity, preferred pronouns, political and religious convictions, mental health diagnoses, involvement in activism, and more. For example: *Bisexual. 25. Feminist. INFP. Ravenclaw. She/her/hers. I have OCD and depression and it sucks but I’m trying... Just a queer woman going about her life (tum.m.4)*. Accordingly, the viewpoints and strategies for communicating them differ on Tumblr. For example, whereas on Reddit, a user argued that *splains* are “blanket statements,” one Tumblr blog addresses the gendered aspect of *mansplain*, writing:

- (1) It is meant to be gender specific [...] a negative gender-encoded behavior should be pointed out AS A NEGATIVE [...] Pointing out a gender bias with a humorous term is not sexist. (tum.m.4)

The differences between Tumblr and Reddit seem to be well-known amongst some of the users, especially in subreddits dedicated to issues of body size. A post in r/Politics featured a story from *The Huffington Post* with *whitesplain* in the title (*red.w.1*). In the comments, the object of discussion was not the content of the news story, but the word *whitesplain*. Two comments protest its use by directly alluding to Tumblr as the source of the perceived problem. The first, in example (2), suggests *splain* words originate from Tumblr, referring to *tumblr words* and how *it's scary* that they appear in *mainstream news*. The implication here aligns with the stereotyped personifications via *The Breakfast Club* characters seen in Figure 20 on page 212, where Tumblr is personified by the eccentric and imaginative character who has her own unique outlook on life. The second, example (3), criticizes language involving “‘privilege’ or ‘blanksplaining’” and furthers the complaint by parodying a Tumblr user. The author of (3) does not use quotation marks, but gradually switches speaker perspective from themselves to a Tumblr user: in the first sentence, the pronouns show the user is speaking in the first person: *...they can't expect me to take them seriously...* Here, “they” refers to the Tumblr users who are subject to the criticism of the post, and “me” refers to the author of this Reddit post. Then, the point of view shifts, where “me” becomes the Tumblr user, and “they” indexes the author and users who share the author’s viewpoint: *How dare someone who has had some margin of success beyond me try to speak from their point of view! I'll have you know that on tumblr, we don't take kindly [...]*. In essence, the comment intertwines Tumblr users, *splain* words and discourses on social inequality with an enactment of censorship.

(2) it's scary seeing tumblr words leak into mainstream news (*red.w.1*)

(3) if someone uses “privilege” or “*blanksplaining*” honestly they can’t expect me to take them seriously, or really, anyone to take them seriously. How dare someone who has had some margin of success beyond me try to speak from their point of view! I’ll have you know that on tumblr, we don’t take kindly to others expressing their views and trying to communicate them with others outside their own group. (*red.t.2*)

On Reddit, there are numerous examples of users referring to *made-up words* and *Tumblr terms*. For example, in a *thinsplain* reddit, the terms *SJW* and *shitlord* came up. When one user asked about *shitlord*, other redditors replied, such as in (4). Example (5) is one of many instances in which redditors declare their refusal to listen to anyone if they employ SNS neologisms.

(4) A shitlord is a Tumblr term... “All teh menz are abusive!” I’m not abusive and saying so is demeaning to the majority of us that aren’t. “Don’t ever post on here again, you Ableist Shitlord! Ur triggering me!” Basically, it’s an anti-third wave feminist... (*red.t.4*)

(5) You lost me with “whitesplain”. What a truly embarrassing way to frame any argument. (*red.w.4*)

While there are instances of so-called *social justice warriors* on Reddit, as well as Tumblr users who criticize such lexical practices, the anti-feminist users are far more vocal on Reddit, and Tumblr posts saturated in feminist discourse are certainly more numerous than the contrary viewpoint. On Tumblr, users often identify certain linguistic practices as characteristic of Reddit, usually indexing noticeable linguistic behaviors as disruptive of the conventions typical of Tumblr. For instance, a Tumblr user reblogged a tweet from Twitter (Figure 24). The original post comes from Twitter; however, the comments that point out the linguistic practices of Reddit are on the Tumblr post that reblogged the tweet. That is, even though the original post came from Twitter, it is the Tumblr users who connect the tweet with certain attributes of Redditors.



Figure 27: Screenshot of tweet recontextualized on Tumblr blog.

Responding to the image reblogged in Figure 24 on a Tumblr blog, one Tumblr user's comment, example (6), interlinks the entire notion of mansplaining to a certain group of redditors in referencing *their whole "red pill/blue pill" thing*, referring to a particular group on Reddit of anti-feminist and proud misogynist users²⁷. She continues on that the pill is *their government-provided natural male enhancement medication*, effectively referencing the embedded "erectile dysfunction" in *correctile dysfunction* and commenting on the debate regarding an incongruent coverage from health insurance providers of Viagra for men in relation to the coverage of birth

²⁷ As Gallagher (2018) explains, "The name "The Red Pill" is a reference to the film, *The Matrix*. Morpheus tells Neo, 'You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill...and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes.' In the film, the red pill represents truth and power. The blue pill, on the other hand, represents ignorance and bliss. Those who consider themselves *redpilled* often cite an experience that makes them come to understand the "dangers" posed by feminism, progressivism, and political correctness. This experience is almost always being rejected by a woman."

control for women, all the while applying her wordplay to Reddit users, archotyping them as mansplainers with “correctile dysfunction.”

- (6) Does this mean that their whole “redpill/bluepill” thing from the Matrix is their government-protected natural male enhancement medication? “If your corrections last longer than four hours, call your doctor immediately.” (*tum.m.2*)

As I have shown, the pattern in how users employ and react to *splain* words on Reddit and Tumblr are rather distinctive. Twitter, however, is less so. In my data, there were fewer discernible trends in terms of Twitter users’ likelihood to demonstrate a particular stance, likely due to the higher quantity and therefore more diverse user demographics on Twitter. On Twitter, users employ a range of meaning-making strategies, such as constructed dialogues, multimodal tweets, and hashtags, but none that are unique to Twitter. Equally, there is a wide range of meanings applied to *splain* words and the discourses incited by *splains* on Twitter. So while the meanings and uses of the *splain* words vary significantly between Reddit and Tumblr, Twitter is everywhere in between. This observation aligns with the affordances of Twitter. The hundreds of millions of users in conjunction with the character limit makes Twitter known for its fast-paced and transient nature. As a result, Twitter users are creative in finding ways to achieve some visibility in the high turnover of tweets. Overall, this finding aligns with the perception of Tumblr and Reddit as being closer to “niche” platforms which attract users with similarities such as age, gender, or shared interests, and where users’ content can more easily reach beyond their group of followers. Twitter, on the other hand, being a major platform like Facebook and Instagram is prone to “an identity crisis” (Elizur, 2018) due to the number of individual and corporate users, as well as the high volume of advertisements and constantly changing algorithms that can make the experience feel simultaneously exposed to the world and completely invisible, given the vast number and diversity of users.

In sum, in addressing RQ2, this chapter has explored the uses and meanings of each of the four *splain* variants and how they differ across the three platforms. And while technological affordances can certainly influence linguistic practices and how users create meaning and interact with one another, the analysis in this chapter shows that for *splain* discourses addressing gender, race, class, and size, that the user demographics of each platform have a more significant impact on the differences in shaping discourses on what inequalities between social categories means for ideologies of language authority.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

This chapter provides a summary and discussion of the study's findings, followed by a presentation of the study's significance in digital discourse research. The chapter ends with an overview of the study's limitations and further research directions.

Discussion and Conclusion

In Chapter 4, I demonstrated various ways that SNS users can use *splain* words to identify a particular type of language. More broadly speaking, the study investigates the ways in which users are being “citizen sociolinguists” (Rymes, 2014) by sharing their insights on linguistic practices, and subsequently identifying and evaluating patterns in how gender, race, class, and body image are treated in social discourse. Navigating the affordances and limitations of the SNS in which they communicate, users express and justify their attitudes towards the pragmalinguistic norms between speakers of different social groups. Their metapragmatic debates are achieved through the use of the semantic and pragmatic functions that are concisely-expressed in the neologisms *mansplain*, *whitesplain*, *richsplain* and *thinsplain*.

The notion of a “citizen sociolinguist” is a SNS user who might comment on or share a piece of language (e.g., retweet another user's post, narrate a dialogue they heard, or clarify their own message) adding their own commentary about that language. This practice is enabled – and made widely visible – by the highly-interactive and intertextual posts, tweets, comments, or blogs of the digital world (Rymes & Leone, 2014). Consequently, patterns emerge, users notice those patterns, and the genre of language encompassed by *splain* labels becomes more recognizable, and thus enregistered.

The common thread that runs throughout all of the examples is that regardless of the pragmatic or other strategies employed, the speakers are alluding to a discursive category that they have observed. Naming that type of language as a form of *splaining* contributes to the *enregisterment* of “privileged explaining.” Even for users who take a negative stance on *splain* words and/or the type of language it describes, interdiscursive patterns are noticed and grouped together. That is, while some users may see *splain* words as a category of condescending language born from imbalances in power and privilege, others may see *splain* words as evidence of rising “social justice warrior,” “feminazi,” or “woke” discourses entering into mainstream culture. Regardless of users’ view on the words’ meaning or influence on social issues, when users discuss *splains*, they are doing metapragmatic work, pointing out linguistic trends and, in turn, shifts in the broader social psyche.

Differences across the four splains. The analysis illuminated various themes for each *splain* word. In the presentation of exemplars from the *mansplain* subset, I demonstrated usages of the word that signified both acceptance and rejection of the gender-specific metalanguage. I showed various methods of semantic, pragmatic, and metapragmatic creativity to communicate their stance on the issue. For example, users may play with the doubly-metapragmatic possibilities of *splain* discourse, e.g., *mansplaining the word mansplain*, to help illustrate what *mansplain* means. I discussed how users draw upon their personal experiences to narrate an instance involving *mansplain*, or to identify others’ language – reposted from elsewhere in cyberspace, or indirectly reported in numerous manners – to contribute to the *enregisterment* of *splain* language.

I also showed how *mansplain* is widely regarded as the ‘original’ *splain* that influenced the coinage of all other *splains*. I showed how users manipulate the semantic value

communicated in their usage of the word: by appropriating the meaning and popularity of *mansplain* for other social categories like *whitesplain*; reversing its meaning by redefining it as tool to unjustifiably censure men; or nullifying its validity by extending its meaning to include speakers and listeners of any gender. These findings align with the findings in Bridges (2017); however an additional, new observation was the number of users who discussed what *mansplain* is not as a response negative or mistaken views on the gendered aspect of the word, and/or that it is used merely to silence men. This shows some progression of how people are discussing the word, and it may also suggest that, unlike the proverbial “15 minutes of fame” for most neologisms, that the shelf life of *splain* words is not yet close to expiring.

The analysis of *whitesplain* shared some similarities and differences with *mansplain*. Namely, users made use of the SNS affordances to share instances of language, recontextualizing it with added their commentary. Through labeling the language of focus as *whitesplain* and sharing observations about the sociolinguistic context of the *whitesplain*, users shed light on a number of ways racial tensions and microaggressions manifest in everyday discourse. Like *mansplain* and sexism, *whitesplain* is often flagged as racist and unproductive in improving race relations. In contrast, class differences may be perceived as “invisible,” and size issues are often perceived as less serious.

In comparing the four *splain* words, only with *man-* and *whitesplain* did users suggest replacing *splain* words with other, more general terms, such as *condescending explanations*, terms that do not encompass an entire social category within the word, or denounced the legitimacy the word. In comparison, the semantic values applied to *richsplain* and *thinsplain* were far less variable. The reason is no doubt partly due to the fact that *rich-* and *thinsplain* are less common and probably newer. Nonetheless, the disputes over the validity and value of *man-*

and *whitesplain* reflect that gender and race are hotly debated issues in today's tumultuous sociopolitical climate.

However, the *richsplain* discourses revealed the relationship between language and socioeconomic status, and in what ways class-related talk can be degrading and unconstructive in lower-class citizens' attempts to have their voices heard. The interactions involving *thinsplain* also brought to light the many processes of marginalization and exclusion based on body size categorizations; the personal, social, and institutional impact it can have; and how health-related discourse about body size permeates fat-stigmatizing language and plays a role in justifying discriminatory discourse.

Interdiscursivity and intersectionality. It is the adaptation and re-appropriation of words and expressions that drive language change – shown by way of neology via lexical blending in this study – and are influenced by social change. The findings also presented some ways in which users talked about the *splain* words in relation to one another, and the implications therein. It is possible for *splain* words to bring awareness to a social phenomenon that for them was previously too difficult to define or was never recognized at all. Additionally, in coming across a *splain* that describes a relatable experience, users may become more open to the realities embodied in other *splains* that they previously dismissed. For instance, in a Reddit comment mentioned in Chapter 4 (see example 10, p. 176), one user expressed delight when first hearing *richsplain*, a contrast to their negative evaluation of *mansplain* and *whitesplain*. Understanding the struggles of the financially troubled and the language that *richsplain* points out could evoke a realization of imbalances in the communicative dynamics between speakers of differing genders and/or race. Example (9) on page 177 exemplified this phenomenon, in which a self-identified male user expresses his epiphanic understanding of *mansplain* upon his encountering *richsplain*.

Cross-platform differences. The second research question investigated users' creative manipulation of language in relation to the user demographics of the three different SNS. In Chapter 5, I discussed the general tendencies of each site in regard to the meanings of the *splains*. While uses of *splains* on Twitter were representative of the various functions and meanings in the entire dataset, I showed how on Reddit and Tumblr, there were distinctive differences of users' attitudes towards [*x*]*splain*, most notably the discourses on gender and race. Discussions of gender and race on Tumblr largely resisted racist and sexist discourses; while on Reddit, most discourses around *whitesplain* and *mansplain* rejected the notion of racial and gender inequality. I discussed how this discrepancy mirrors the differences in user demographics of Reddit and Tumblr. Specifically, Chapter 5 showed that although technological affordances of each platform may play a role in the shaping of discourses on each site, such as the "upvoting" feature on Reddit, my findings overall show that the most significant factor in how users discuss the metapragmatics of gender, race, class, and size is the user demographics of a SNS. This is most clearly demonstrated by Reddit and Tumblr and their characteristics as niche spaces for a particular type of citizen. Around three-fourths of Reddit users are young, white males who use Reddit as a space for self-expression amongst other users with similar views and interests, views and interests that may be less welcomed in other spaces. The analysis in Chapter 4 revealed that most stances towards gender and race communicated on Reddit position users as defensive against terms that they view as biased against them for being White males. The comments that are the most "upvoted" also support the representation of what is socially valuable on Reddit, since the top comments in most of the collected posts were disparaging of *splain* words and associated social aspects such as the revulsion towards "social justice warriors," "feminazis," and "Tumblr people." On the contrary, Tumblr's characteristics of promoting users' self-expression

and encouraging greater interconnectivity between users than other SNS (Connelly, 2015) has attracted users who wish to personalize their space on Tumblr, and constructed a community of users who share similar perspectives. Tumblr users are widely characterized as liberal, feminist, members or allies of the LGBTQ community, and pejoratively as “social justice warriors.” These user characteristics appear more often than not in Tumblr users’ biographies. In my Tumblr data, 20 of the 28 users’ biographies depicted women, and the profiles included self-descriptions such as *bisexual*, *dyke*, *young queer & angry*, *afro-centered*, *LGBT*, *feminist sass machine*, *men’s frights activist*, and many more.

In conclusion, I reiterate two main points and implications of my research. First, by studying what the millions of citizen sociolinguists in digital discourse are saying about language, we can observe the manifestation of a collective genre identified by ordinary language users. Considering how users identify patterns of language use in certain social contexts, we gain insight on what is important to citizens and why. Secondly, user practices are largely shaped by the parameters of the SNS, and they can therefore contribute to conventionalizing the linguistic practices of that site. As a result, it is important in digital discourse studies to consider not only the way meaning-making strategies might be afforded or restrained by the site’s technological features, such as the dialogic nature of SNS or aspects like the “upvoting” and “downvoting” on Reddit; but as this study has shown, the user demographics of a SNS can carry an even more significant impact on how discourses are shaped on varying platforms.

Limitations and Future Directions of Research

There are limitations of this study that need to be considered. One drawback is that the dataset is restricted to a few hundred instances from three platforms and focuses on only four of the most prevalent words. It represents only a piece of *splain* language in online discourse. The

analysis is a close qualitative investigation and cannot therefore make broader claims about the language under investigation, which would require a larger quantitative or corpus-based study. Further work involving corpus-based evidence may be capable in uncovering additional patterns of how the *splain* words are used. Other research might focus on how discourse about *[x]splain* (or other metapragmatic neologisms) occurring in other settings beyond social media, such as in journalism, in entertainment media like late-night television shows and movies, or in spoken language. It would also be interesting to examine how the usage of *splains* and attitudes towards them might change over time, especially considering the lifespan so far of *mansplain* and the topics of *mansplain* and *whitesplain* recently appearing more frequently in popular culture and media. Investigating how the intersection of social groups and language norms are resisted and how their boundaries shift provides insights into the capacity of invented words and linguistic creativity to identify and challenge social norms. Consequently, looking at other metapragmatic neologisms that appear and circulate online could also illuminate ways in which people recognize themselves, one another, or language practices as belonging to certain members of society.

Finally, although there are several limitations to my study, it contributes to the understanding of digital discourse practices, SNS, and social-group-based metalanguage. My theoretical framework combining Citizen Sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, and computer mediated discourse analysis has not previously been applied for the exploration of SNS. Additionally, Reddit and Tumblr remain under-researched platforms; thus, my research may contribute to the methodology of future studies on the three platforms, as well as to cross-platform research. It is hoped that this study will help inform future research on the relationship between language use and social groups in digital spaces, as well as fields beyond

sociolinguistics that are dedicated to social equality. My research does not come from a stationary or stagnant context, thus contextual changes that might occur, such as updates to the technological affordances, or shifting societal tensions in the event of undergoing transformations in political or economic orders. However, the goal of this study has not been to make generalizations about *splain* discourse online, but rather to present representative samples that spotlight elements of the discourse that communicate ideologies of language, and how it interacts with structures of power and equality in society. In this respect, the study contributes to the understanding of the interrelationship between language, society, and the changes therein.

Contributions of the Study

Although there are limitations to my study, it nonetheless contributes in several ways to the understanding of metapragmatic language, digital discourse practices, and conflicting ideologies of gender, race, class, and body size. First, this study contributes in a theoretical sense to scholarship on how everyday language users' metapragmatic awareness exposes numerous ways in which language use can indexically categorize speakers as particular types of citizens. The methodology I used is the first, to my knowledge, to fuse CMDA, CDA, and Citizen Sociolinguistics. This methodology helped me to explore insights put forth by SNS users so as to observe the wider trends in the discourses, and thus consider what practices and ideologies are most valued by SNS users, and what it means in the broader sense of power dynamics between members of varying social categories.

My study has also demonstrated the value of close, contextual analyses of digital discourse, and how discourses are shaped by the various parameters of the SNS on which they occur. The study also demonstrates how the linguistic practices of everyday SNS users serve as a prolific source of authentic language use. And although most recent research on digital language

has taken a big-data quantitative focus and used large corpora to track trends (boyd, 2010), the qualitative analysis here has traced how links can be formed between micro-level utterances and trends in macro-level ideologies, and in a way that may not necessarily be observable in quantitative studies.

The study also considers the importance of understanding how we incorporate technology into our everyday lives in order to know how our practices in digital communication influence our positioning in the world and amongst one another. My study is one of very few in CMDA that has done a cross-platform analysis and can therefore be used to inform future studies that compare discourses of two or more social-networking spaces. Additionally, Tumblr and Reddit are under-researched areas, so my methodological approach to finding and collecting language data on those sites serves as another contribution to digital discourse studies.

In addition, to date, most research in digital discourse analysis focuses on individual texts, isolated somewhere in time and cyberspace. My study is uncommon in its approaching a common argument structure that is generated when users of opposing viewpoints interact. Therefore, my analytical procedures for identifying and presenting trends in the development of discourses on a broader scale can help guide future studies that may also aim to track major stages in how controversial disputes unfold between polarized opinions.

Finally, I have contributed to scholarship on how language practices and ideologies intersect with issues of gender, race, class, and body size; specifically, how users organize entitlement to particular discourses, and how metapragmatic disputes of linguistic authority expose macro-scale axiologies. Lastly, I am glad to have been able to present a wide range of voices from varying groups who feel unfairly silenced, as well as discourses that – due to the

attention-grabbing quality of metapragmatic *splain* words – start conversations and expose fellow SNS users to realities beyond their own.

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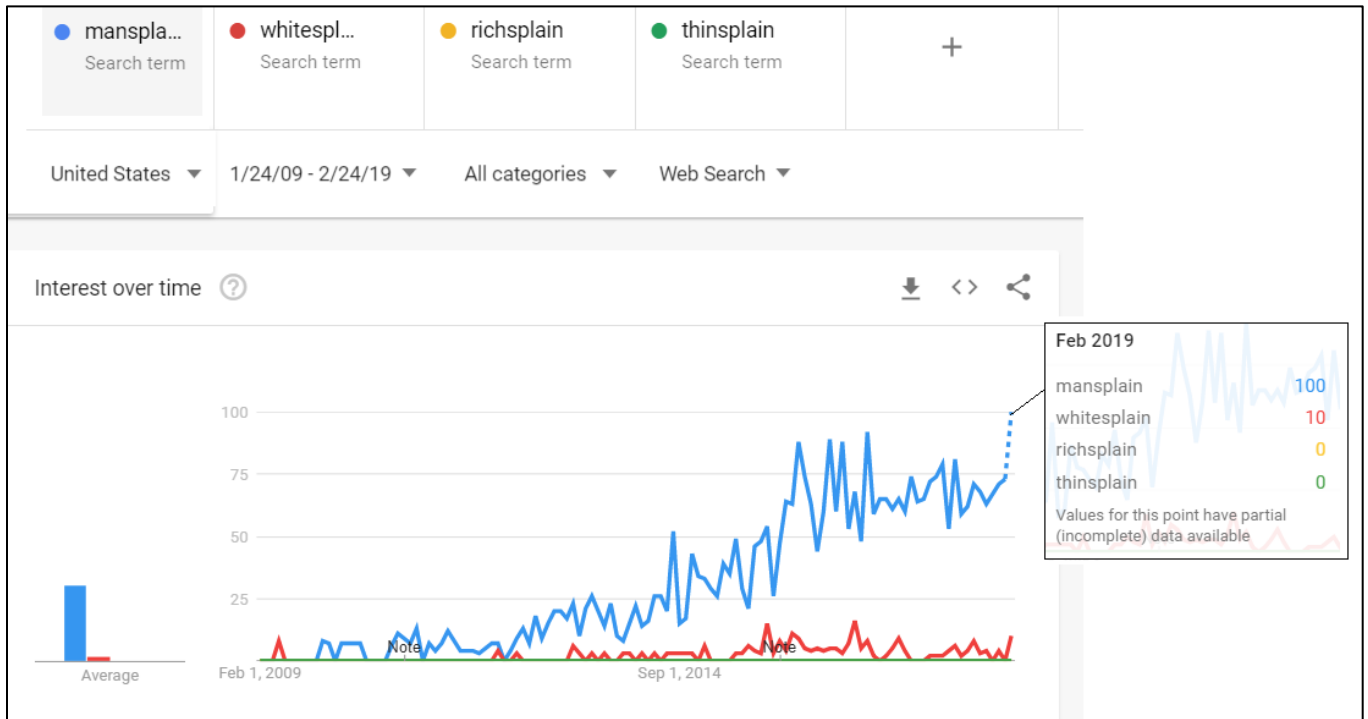
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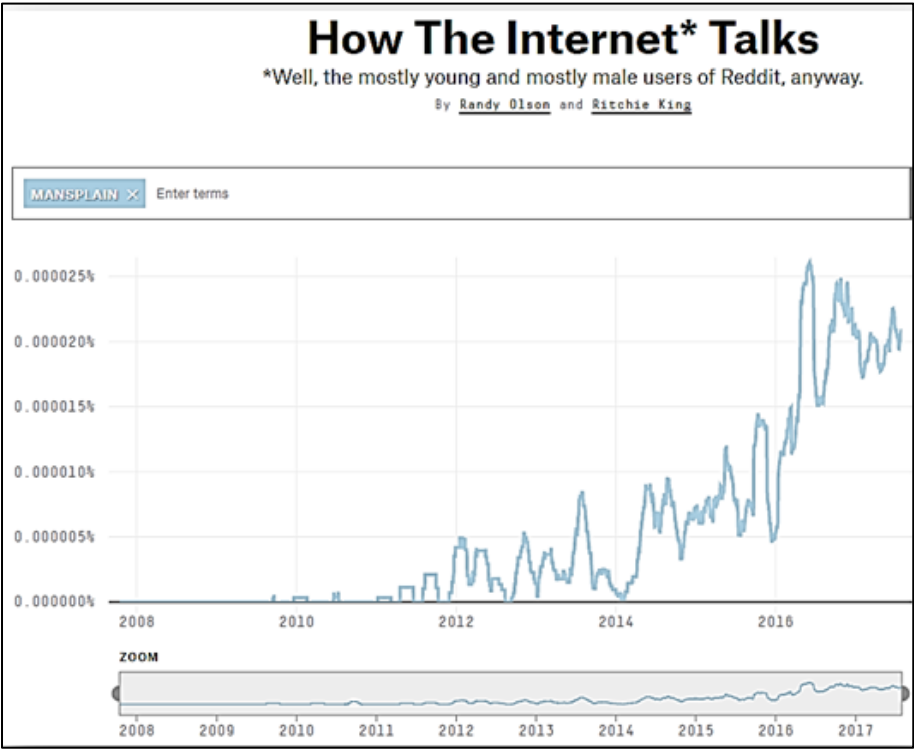
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Usage of *splain* words between 2009 and 2017:



(<https://www.google.com/trends>)

Appendix B: Usage of *mansplain* on Reddit between 2008 and 2017.



(Olsen & King, 2017).

Appendix C: USF Fair Use Worksheet (p. 274-276)

INSTRUCTIONS

Check all boxes that apply, and keep a copy of this form for your records. If you have questions, please contact the USF General Counsel or your USF Tampa Library Copyright Librarian.

Name: Judith C. Bridges Date: 7/2/2019

Class or Project: Dissertation

Title of Copyrighted Work: [x]splaining gender, race, class, and body: Metapragmatic disputes of linguistic authority and ideologies in Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr

PURPOSE AND CHARACTER OF THE USE

Likely Supports Fair Use	Likely Does Not Support Fair Use
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Educational <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Research or Scholarship <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Criticism, Parody, News Reporting or Comment <input type="checkbox"/> Transformative Use (your new work relies on and adds new expression, meaning, or message to the original work) <input type="checkbox"/> Restricted Access (to students or other appropriate group) <input type="checkbox"/> Nonprofit	<input type="checkbox"/> Commercial <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment <input type="checkbox"/> Bad-faith behavior <input type="checkbox"/> Denying credit to original author <input type="checkbox"/> Non-transformative or exact copy <input type="checkbox"/> Made accessible on Web or to public <input type="checkbox"/> Profit-generating use

Overall, the purpose and character of your use supports fair use or does not support fair use.

NATURE OF THE COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

Likely Supports Fair Use	Likely Does Not Support Fair Use
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Factual or nonfiction <input type="checkbox"/> Important to favored educational objectives <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Published work	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Creative or fiction <input type="checkbox"/> Consumable (workbooks, tests) <input type="checkbox"/> Unpublished

Overall, the nature of the copyrighted material supports fair use or does not support fair use.

AMOUNT AND SUBSTANTIALITY OF MATERIAL USED IN RELATION TO WHOLE

Likely Supports Fair Use	Likely Does Not Support Fair Use
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small amount (using only the amount necessary to accomplish the purpose) <input type="checkbox"/> Amount is important to favored socially beneficial objective (i.e. educational objectives) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lower quality from original (ex. Lower resolution or bitrate photos, video, and audio)	<input type="checkbox"/> Large portion or whole work <input type="checkbox"/> Portion used is qualitatively substantial (i.e. it is the 'heart of the work') <input type="checkbox"/> Similar or exact quality of original work

Overall, the amount and substantiality of material used in relation to the whole supports fair use or does not support fair use.

EFFECT ON THE MARKET FOR ORIGINAL

Likely Supports Fair Use	Likely Does Not Support Fair Use
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No significant effect on the market or potential market for the original <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No similar product marketed by the copyright holder <input type="checkbox"/> You own a lawfully acquired copy of the material <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The copyright holder is unidentifiable <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lack of licensing mechanism for the material	<input type="checkbox"/> Replaces sale of copyrighted work <input type="checkbox"/> Significantly impairs market or potential market for the work <input type="checkbox"/> Numerous copies or repeated, long-term use <input type="checkbox"/> Made accessible on Web or to public <input type="checkbox"/> Affordable and reasonably available permissions or licensing

Overall, the effect on the market for the original supports fair use or does not support fair use.

CONCLUSION

The combined purpose and character of the use, nature of the copyrighted material, amount and substantiality of material used in relation to the whole and the effect on the market for the original likely supports fair use or likely does not support fair use.

Note: Should your use of copyrighted material not support fair use, you may still be able to locate and request permissions from the copyright holder. For help on this, please feel free to [contact your Copyright Librarian](#).

This worksheet has been adapted from:

Cornell University's Checklist for Conducting A Fair use Analysis Before Using Copyrighted Materials:

https://copyright.cornell.edu/policies/docs/Fair_Use_Checklist.pdf

Crews, Kenneth D. (2008) Fair use Checklist. Columbia University Libraries Copyright Advisory Office.

<http://copyright.columbia.edu/copyright/files/2009/10/fairusechecklist.pdf>

Smith, Kevin; Macklin, Lisa A.; Gilliland, Anne. A Framework for Analyzing any Copyright Problem. Retrieved from:

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