

Speaker's power to act on words influences listeners' brain response

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A speaker's power to act on his words influences how a listener perceives the meaning of their message, according to research published July 24 in the open access journal *PLoS ONE* by Ina Bornkessel-Schlesewsky from the University of Marburg, Germany, and colleagues from other institutions.

For example, listeners are more likely to believe a political figure is capable of acting on the words "Tear down this wall!" than when an ordinary citizen makes the same statement. In this study, researchers presented participants with videotaped statements about politics spoken by a top [political decision](#)-maker, a news anchor or an unknown person. In a second scenario, the same people uttered statements related to general world knowledge. Brain responses to implausible statements about current affairs differed when uttered by a political figure as opposed to the other speakers, but implausible general world knowledge statements led to a similar brain response across all three speakers.

The effects occur rapidly, within 150-450 [milliseconds](#) of hearing a statement, and demonstrate that a listener's response to a message is immediately influenced by the social status of the speaker, and whether he or she has the power to bring about the state of affairs described by their words. Bornkessel-Schlesewsky explains, "Every day, we hear statements that surprise us because they do not correspond to what we (think we) know about the world. Our study demonstrates that, in understanding such utterances, our brain rapidly takes into account who said them (e.g. a [politician](#) versus our neighbor) and whether he or she in

fact has the power to act upon what was said."

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