

Social status and power of action of speakers determine the way their statements are perceived

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The actual standing of speakers within a society's power structure determines how their statements are perceived. This is the conclusion reached in a joint study undertaken by neurolinguist Professor Ina Bornkessel-Schlesewsky of the University of Marburg and linguist Professor Matthias Schlewsky of Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU) with the support of Sylvia Krauspsenhaar, who participated in the study as a member of the Neurotypology research group at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig. The results were recently published in an article entitled "Yes, you can? A speaker's potency to act upon his words orchestrates early neural responses to message-level meaning" in the open-access journal *PLoS ONE*.

For the purposes of the study, the team of researchers exposed their trial group to video recordings of a politically influential decision-maker, an eminent news anchor, and a person completely unknown to the test subjects expressing both plausible and implausible statements. The first speaker was Peer Steinbrück, the then Federal Minister of Finance, and the second was Ulrich Wickert, a former TV newscaster. They spoke from a script produced especially for the study; all the statements made were classifiable either in the categories "general knowledge" or "politics". While obviously false statements relating to the real world (such as "Fidel Castro is a pop singer.") triggered similar reactions in the test subjects' brains in the case of all three speakers, the reactions to

implausible [political statements](#) (such as "The federal government has announced that it will be leaving NATO.") differed depending on the speaker. The EEG recordings made while subjects were listening to politician Steinbrück diverged from those made when the other, non-political speakers made the same statements.

"We believe that the observed variations in listeners' reactions to political statements represent the immediate influence of the speaker's perceived ability to transform their words into actions on the way the listener interprets the message," explained Professor Matthias Schlesewsky of the Department of English and Linguistics at JGU. "The decisive factor is whether the listener assumes that the speaker has the power to transform what he or she says into reality." Professor Ina Bornkessel-Schlesewsky added: "Clearly political decision-makers are considered to have significantly more influence than simple citizens or other prominent persons." It had been previously assumed that it was only factors such as listeners' general knowledge and their current mood, among numerous other aspects, that determined the reactions in the brain to spoken statements.

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