

The Role of Linguistic Markers of Agency in Mobilizing Collective Action

At the time of submitting this proposal the world stages global protests after the brutal killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by a police officer. This incident of racial injustice energized a movement demanding a systemic change in race relations. The movement has united many people over a common goal and, therefore, can be considered a perfect example of a *collective action*, defined as an action aimed at improving the conditions of an entire group rather than those of only a few individual members of that group. The importance of addressing the injustice and inequality entrenched in existing social arrangements has led to a plethora of research devoted to examining what drives people toward civic engagement in social change. Our aim is to complement this research by addressing, in-depth, how language contributes to collective action. Collective action often arises from language, including passionate speeches, provocative and inspiring social media posts, or emotional stories by victims of moral injustice. Language practices can contribute to maintaining or transforming the existing social order, and our project aims to extend the understanding of that contribution.

Given that collective action is by definition goal and action oriented, in this project we put particular focus on the role of language pertaining to agency defined as goal or action orientation. We treat linguistic markers of agency as proxies for expressing content related to agency. Specifically, linguistic agency can be marked in semantic and in grammatical agency. Semantic agency is explicitly mentioned in a given utterance (e.g., “We are efficient”). Grammatical agency is based on the premise that verbs are the prototypical linguistic vehicles of action. Based on that verb–activity link, verbs are also the most suitable grammatical category for expressing social agency. That is, the phrases “to protect” and “protection” are likely to be seen as similar on a semantic grid; however, the first may be seen as more agentic than the latter due to the use of the verb.

In this research project, we will examine three potential contributions of linguistic markers of agency to collective action. In Goal 1, we will examine whether movements related to collective action utilize agentic references to express their goals and, more so, when they need to evoke political mobilization. In Goal 2, we will examine whether agency-laden messages are more effective than nonagentic messages in terms of eliciting action intentions and actual actions in both real and online contexts. In Goal 3, we will extend these findings by examining linguistic agency as the moderator of the role of moral-emotional language that has been previously observed in research on the effectiveness of collective action messages. Specifically, we will examine whether moral-emotional verbs (e.g., “we fight” vs. “our fight”) can have particularly strong impact on message effectiveness.

Each line entails analyses of social media and carefully controlled experimental studies. Social media (here Twitter) offers an ecologically valid test of the relationship between linguistic agency and collective action, as it provides a window into how language is used in real life. Yet, social media analysis provides only correlational evidence. Therefore, in each line of work, we will also conduct experimental studies that will allow for causal inference of the hypothesized effects.

We consider this contribution important because, while there is a growing appreciation of language’s role in the formation of collective behavior, much is still unknown about specific language features that drive individuals and groups to action. Overall, the advancement in the understanding of the linguistic manifestations of agency in the relationship to collective action can have important theoretical and applied implications for communication in social and political domains. We plan to publish the outcomes of this project in at least five international high-impact journals and present them at three international conferences.